



Our Languages Our Way

A guide for the use of Aboriginal
Languages in NSW



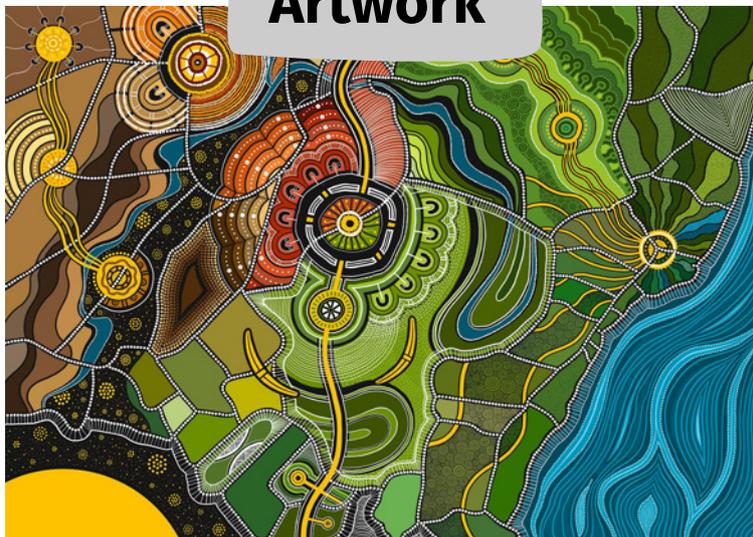
Acknowledgement of Country

The Aboriginal Languages Trust acknowledges the Custodians of the lands on which we live, work and learn. We pay our respects to Aboriginal Peoples who have cared for this land and its Languages since time immemorial.

We acknowledge that the ongoing existence of Aboriginal Languages across New South Wales is a testament to Aboriginal Peoples' deep connections to Country and unique Knowledge of their lands.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we acknowledge the leaders of today who share the Languages of Country for the continuity of their Cultures.

Artwork



The Voice of Country

by **Amy Allerton**

Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Gamilaroi artist

At the beginning of creation, the land gave birth to Language, a living force, spreading out far and wide, connecting us to our creator, our Ancestors, our Country and our Culture. The voice of Country speaks to us through the water, the earth, the stars and the spirits of those past, present and future. The winds of Language travel through each tribe and Nation, it is diverse and yet it is one, bringing strength, Knowledge and healing. "The Voice of Country" tells the intertwined story of Identity and sovereignty.

It represents the foundation of Language which is ingrained in Culture, Community and Country across NSW, and speaks of the unyielding resilience of the world's oldest living Culture. It shows the inseparable nature of the physical, intellectual and spiritual manifestations of Language that shape the identity of Aboriginal peoples, and connects them to each other and the land. "The Voice of Country" is an invitation for all peoples to come together in partnership to share in the dawn of a new, enriched and thriving future, where Language is heard, people are seen, connection is strengthened and Culture is celebrated.

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COVER IMAGE: Waagan Galga Dancers and conference delegates at the NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 on Wonnarua Country. Taken by Joseph Mayers.

Introduction

Our Languages Our Way: A Guideline for the Use of Aboriginal Languages in NSW was informed by consultations with Language Specialists and Language Custodians across NSW.

We acknowledge and thank all who have generously contributed to this work. Without their generosity, wisdom, time, and knowledge, *Our Languages, Our Way* would not have been possible.

We thank Djinjama for leading consultations with Communities, and all Aboriginal People who have generously shared their time, knowledge, and expertise to inform this work.

We acknowledge the people and organisations who allowed us to share their stories through case studies to bring *Our Languages Our Way* to life.

We recognise that the information shared by Language Specialists and Language Custodians has informed the contents of *Our Languages Our Way* with their permission. This information has been used to develop the quotes, principles, imagery, guidance, and case studies contained in this publication. The knowledge shared remains the cultural and intellectual property of the individuals, their families, and Communities as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

Any use, reproduction, or dealing with any part of the ICIP in this publication for purposes not expressly authorised by the contributors and Language Custodians constitutes a breach of customary law and may also breach the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

Our Languages Our Way should be considered in line with the following documents that this work is grounded on. In particular, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) contains the minimum standards for the protection, recognition, and promotion of Indigenous rights:

- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*
- *Community Guidelines Protecting your Cultural and Intellectual Property* by the Aboriginal Languages Trust
- *Aboriginal Dual Names Policy* by the Department of Planning, Industry & Environment
- *Consultation Outcomes Report* by the Aboriginal Languages Trust
- *Strategic Plan 2022–2027* by the Aboriginal Languages Trust
- *Cultural Knowledge Standards Framework Part 2: Guidelines for researchers, government agencies and consultants working with Aboriginal Communities*

Terminology

The Aboriginal Languages Trust capitalises words that have distinct meaning for Aboriginal People. We do this as a sign of respect and note that this may differ from capitalisation used in Standard Australian English. These words include Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Language, Culture, Community, Country, Custodians, Songlines, Lore/Law, Ancestors, Old People, Aboriginal People/s.

For the purpose of the Guidelines, the terms “Aboriginal Community,” “Language Specialists,” and “Language Custodians” are commonly used to refer to the individuals and groups to be engaged in Language use activities, acknowledging that the appropriate protocols for engagement vary between Communities.

Aboriginal Community

For the purpose of the Guidelines, the term “Aboriginal Community” is used to refer to the diverse people, groups, and organisations that exist within and across each Community. This term may encompass Elders, Cultural and consultative groups, Language groups, and other formal and informal networks with shared connection to a place, Country, kinship, Language, and/or Cultural identity. We recognise the groups that make up each Community will be specific to the protocols and preferences of each local Community.

Language Custodians

For the purpose of the Guidelines, the term “Language Custodians” is used to refer to those who hold the Cultural authority and responsibility for their Language. They are the keepers and transmitters of linguistic and Cultural knowledge systems, ensuring Language is maintained and passed on in ways that uphold Cultural integrity and Community protocols.

This term is used alongside Language Specialists to honour the deep Cultural responsibility that Custodians carry. While Language Specialists may focus on practical aspects of revitalisation, Language Custodians embody the Cultural and spiritual connection to Language, guiding how it should be taught, shared, and protected within their Community.

Language Specialists

For the purpose of the Guidelines, the term Language Specialists is used to refer to those who hold a critical role in Language revitalisation, teaching, and documentation. These individuals possess specialised knowledge and skills that support the ongoing preservation and strengthening of Aboriginal Languages. Language Specialists are often the key people actively doing the Language work developing learning materials, leading teaching initiatives, conducting research, and contributing to Community-led Language planning.

Our Languages, Our Way: A Guideline for the Use of Aboriginal Languages in NSW may be referred to as “the Guidelines” or “Our Languages, Our Way” throughout this document.

Definitions

Note: Aboriginal peoples may have different interpretations and meanings for the terms below. The definitions provided here are intended to give context to the Guidelines.

Cultural knowledge systems: Aboriginal Peoples have a wealth of intergenerational Cultural knowledge passed down through oral traditions through generations. This knowledge manifests in both intangible forms and material Culture, including traditional knowledge and Cultural expressions, oral traditions, dance, Language, medicine, as well as tools and artworks.¹

Aboriginal healing: Aboriginal healing refers to the healing from intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal Peoples as a collective. Aboriginal Peoples' healing is a holistic process, which addresses social, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs and involves connections to Culture, family and Country. Healing works best when solutions are Culturally strong, developed and driven at the local level, and led by Aboriginal Peoples.²

Country: Country is the term often used by Aboriginal People to describe the lands, waterways, skies, and seas to which they are connected. There are specific boundaries that are measured by natural features of Country, an example can be a river system or mountain range. The term Country contains complex ideas about Lore, place, customs, Language, spiritual belief, Cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.³

Self-determination: Self-determination is about Aboriginal People having control over their own lives and Communities. It is the right of Aboriginal Peoples to freely determine their political status and economic, social and Cultural development. The outcomes of self-determining processes must correspond to the free and voluntary choice of the people concerned.⁴

Community protocols: Locally agreed ways of working, not always in written form, that guide the sharing of knowledge and engagement processes. These protocols are determined by Aboriginal Communities themselves to uphold Cultural integrity, respect, and appropriate ways of working together.⁵



- 1 Australian Library and Information Association. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Linked Data, ALIA, 2020.
- 2 Healing Foundation. Aboriginal Healing, The Healing Foundation, 2025.
- 3 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Understanding Country, AIATSIS, 2020.
- 4 Australian Human Rights Commission. Self determination and Indigenous peoples, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023.
- 5 Adapted from Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Cultural Knowledge Standards Framework: Part 2 – Guidelines for Researchers, Government Agencies and Consultants Working with Aboriginal Communities (NSW Government, 2025) and Create NSW, Aboriginal Arts & Culture Protocols (NSW Government, 2023)

Indigenous/Aboriginal Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP): ICIP means the rights Indigenous Peoples have in relation to all aspects of their Cultural heritage, including:

- Traditional knowledge (scientific, agricultural, technical, ecological and ritual knowledge)
- Traditional Cultural expression (stories, designs, symbols, literature and Language)
- Performances (ceremonies, dance and song)
- Cultural objects (including, but not limited to, arts, crafts, ceramics, jewellery, weapons, tools, visual arts, photographs, textiles and contemporary art practices)
- Human remains and tissues
- Cultural governance and practice
- Immovable Cultural property, places, sacred and historically significant sites and burial grounds
- Secret and sacred material, information and documentation of Indigenous Peoples' heritage in all forms of media such as film, photographs, artistic works, books, reports and records taken by others, sound recordings and digital databases.⁶

Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDSov): Refers to the right of Aboriginal People to own and control data collected about them, their Culture or their Country.⁷

Language use: The use of Aboriginal Languages in any settings outside the Aboriginal Community, such as within schools, media, resources, government programs, public signage, or projects.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): A principle that ensures Aboriginal Communities have the right to give or withhold consent to activities that may affect their lands, Cultures, or Languages. FPIC requires that consent is given freely, before any project or decision begins, and with full, transparent information provided in Culturally appropriate ways.⁸



⁶ Aboriginal Affairs NSW. (2025). Cultural Knowledge Standards Framework: Part 2 – Guidelines for researchers, government agencies and consultants working with Aboriginal communities. NSW Government.

⁷ Aboriginal Affairs NSW. (2025). Cultural Knowledge Standards Framework: Part 2 – Guidelines for researchers, government agencies and consultants working with Aboriginal communities. NSW Government.

⁸ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Article 19.

Foreword from the Executive Director

I am a proud Gamilaroi man, now living and working on Gadigal Country. As Executive Director of the Aboriginal Languages Trust (the Trust), I have the privilege and honour of leading an Aboriginal-led NSW Government agency dedicated to the revitalisation and protection of Aboriginal Languages.

Our Languages are and always have been etched into waterways, rivers, mountains, and Country. They continue to tell stories and hold knowledge deeply rooted in Culture, kinship, Lore, and spirituality. Across NSW, Aboriginal Communities have worked and continue to work tirelessly to reclaim, revitalise, and strengthen their Languages. The journey of Language revitalisation is ongoing and requires the collective effort of Aboriginal Communities, government agencies, educators, and the wider public.

These Guidelines have been developed in response to calls from Community for guidance around Language use. There is a growing demand for Language use across schools, childcare centres, workplaces, media, and public spaces. They are grounded in the voices and experiences of Aboriginal People and provide practical tools to ensure Language is used in ways that honour our Old People, uphold Cultural integrity, and respect Community protocols. Language is not simply a resource; it is sacred knowledge that must be approached with truth, patience, and respect.

I commend these Guidelines to all who seek to learn, speak, share, or incorporate Aboriginal Languages into their lives and organisations. When done the right way, Language use can bring us together, strengthen identity, and ensure our Languages remain visible and spoken for generations to come. Together, we can support the revitalisation and protection of Aboriginal Languages across NSW.

I thank the many people who have contributed their Cultural knowledge, time, and passion to this important work especially the case study contributors and Community members who generously shared their experiences with the Aboriginal Languages Trust. We are deeply grateful for your trust and generosity, which has allowed us to produce this resource to ensure our Languages are cared for, safe, and loved by all who seek to use them.



Brendan Moyle

Gomeroi

Executive Director

Aboriginal Languages Trust

Policy Context

Prior to colonisation, NSW was home to many Languages and dialects. Today, these Languages have been devastated by past and present policies that have failed to protect Aboriginal Peoples' connections to Kinship, Country, Culture, and identity. Racist attitudes and policies weaponised the use of Languages, displaced people from their homelands, and removed babies from their families known today as the Stolen Generations.⁹ The impact of these policies is still felt today.

Globally, there is a phenomenon of Indigenous Language loss. Australia's Language loss rates are among the highest in the world, often described as "under threat" and in a "critical and precarious state"¹⁰. The shared experience of Language loss across the globe led to the United Nations declaring 2022–2032 the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* to raise awareness and mobilise support for Indigenous Languages.

New South Wales is the only jurisdiction in Australia with legislation to protect and strengthen Indigenous Languages. The *NSW Aboriginal Languages Act 2017* became law on 24 October 2017, the first legislation in Australia to explicitly recognise the significance of Aboriginal Languages.¹¹ The Act commenced in 2020 following statewide consultations. This led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Languages Trust, which provides a focused, coordinated, and sustained effort in relation to Aboriginal Languages at local, regional, and state levels. The affairs of the Trust are managed by the Aboriginal Languages Trust Board. Prior to this legislation, there was little targeted or dedicated support for Aboriginal Languages in the state at a government level.

Outcome 16 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to ensure that '*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing*'.¹² The Agreement is supported by Priority Reforms aimed at changing government approaches, formalising partnerships, building the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Sector, and sharing access to Indigenous data. NSW includes an additional Priority Reform focusing on employment, business growth, and economic prosperity. At a national level, the Language Policy Partnership (LPP) coordinates efforts across governments, reporting quarterly on funding and progress. In NSW, the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations works jointly with the State Government to oversee progress on Target 16.

⁹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, 1997.

¹⁰ Marmion, D., Obata, K., & Troy, J. *Community, Identity, Wellbeing: The Report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey*, AIATSIS, 2014.

¹¹ NSW Government. *Aboriginal Languages Act 2017*.

¹² *Closing the Gap Agreement. National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, 2020.

Language revitalisation has positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal People through its intrinsic connection to people, Culture, Family, Kinship, and Country. A recent *Mayi Kuwayu Study* found that participating in a Language program was associated with a higher prevalence of good to excellent general health, happiness, life satisfaction, and connection to Culture.¹³ Learning an Aboriginal Language has also been shown to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students by strengthening identity and engagement at school.¹⁴ There is a growing body of evidence showing that there are social and economic benefits to learning and speaking Aboriginal Languages.¹⁵

PICTURED: Waagan Galga Dancers at the NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 on Wonnarua Country. Taken by Joseph Mayers.



¹³ Jones, R., Thurber, K. A., & Lovett, R. *Mayi Kuwayu: The National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing*, 2022.

¹⁴ Department of Education NSW. *Aboriginal Languages: Language and Culture Nests*, 2020.

¹⁵ AIATSIS. *Indigenous Languages and the Economy: Realising the Economic Benefits of Indigenous Language Programs*, 2019.

Purpose

Our Languages Our Way is informed by consultations with Language Specialists and Language Custodians across NSW. The protocols for Language use in NSW reflect unique Cultural, historical, and Community circumstances, and may differ significantly from those in other parts of the Country and from each other.

In 2021 the Aboriginal Languages Trust undertook extensive consultation with Aboriginal Communities and Language stakeholders across NSW on its Strategic Plan. The Aboriginal Languages Trust's research agenda is based on these extensive consultations which includes a focus on building a solid evidence base and thought leadership to Language policy, including the need for guidance to inform the growing demand for the use of Aboriginal Language across NSW.

Aboriginal Languages are used in programs and projects run by governments, corporations, schools, early childhood services and other professional sectors across NSW. Many organisations engage with Aboriginal Languages in some way, for varying reasons. Examples of Language use include:

- Schools using Languages for songs and dance
- Language use for teaching
- Signage of Language in childcare settings and schools
- Language signage in public settings such as town entrances
- Acknowledgement of Country plaques
- Language use in naming reports, programs, meeting rooms, buildings, or projects

Communities have long raised concerns about the ways the broader population approaches Language use. While often well-meaning, these efforts can appear tokenistic or as a “tick box” exercise. Language is not something that can be taken and used without appropriate consultation and agreements with Community because it is something sacred and loved that was taken away from Aboriginal People, many of whom are only just starting to reclaim their Languages.

The purpose of *Our Languages, Our Way* is to provide practical advice and guidance across all industries, to inform organisations and people about the appropriate use of Aboriginal Languages, and to provide Aboriginal Communities with Guidelines they can offer to parties interested in Language use.

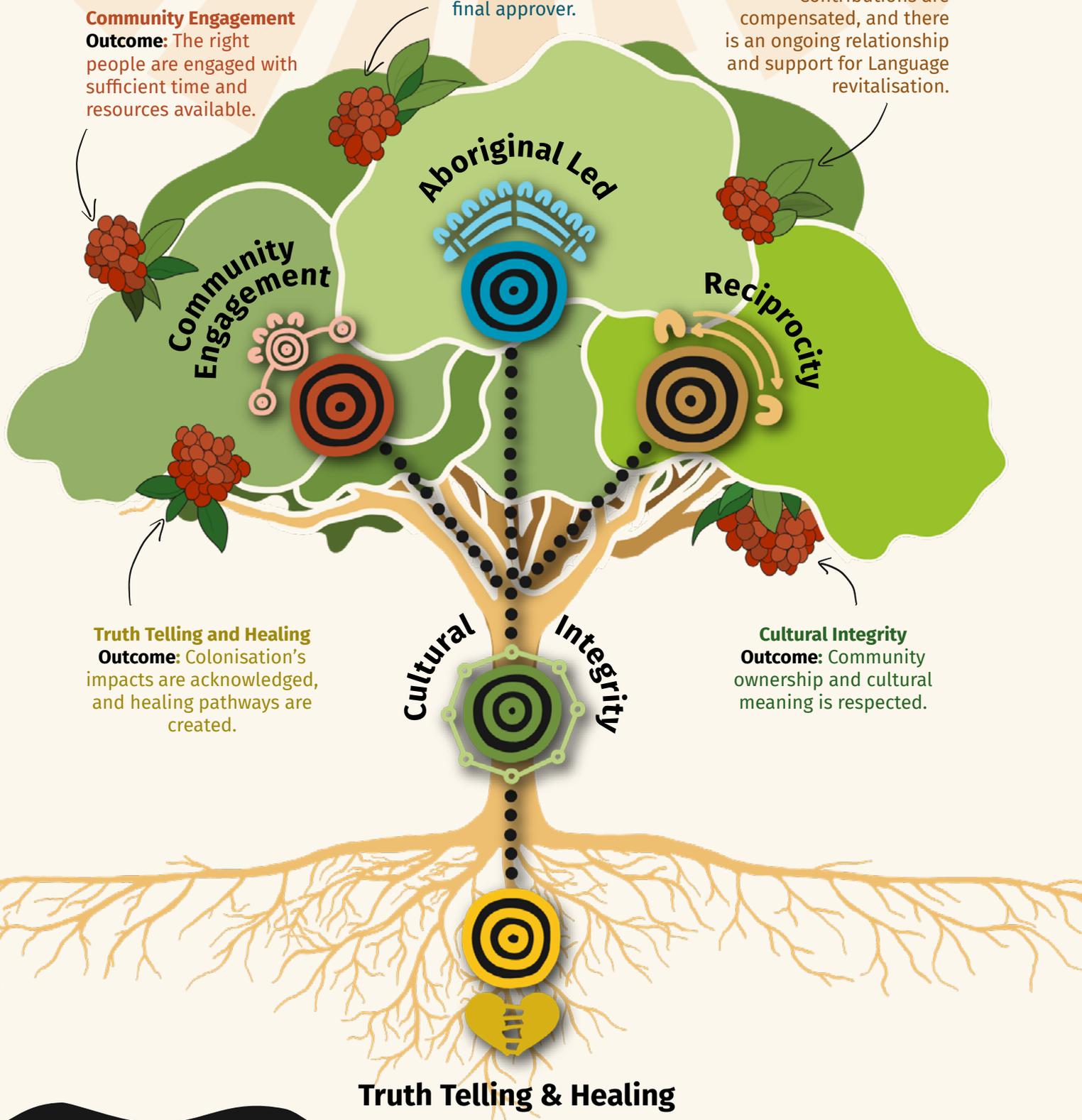
In the context of this Guideline, Language use refers to the use of Aboriginal Languages in any setting external to the Aboriginal Community. Any Language use activity should be informed by a **broad range of networks in accordance with local Community protocols with sufficient time and resources available.**

Guiding Principles for Language use

Community Engagement Outcome: The right people are engaged with sufficient time and resources available.

Aboriginal Led Outcome: Aboriginal led from start to finish with Community as the final approver.

Reciprocity Outcome: Contributions are compensated, and there is an ongoing relationship and support for Language revitalisation.





Principle 1: Community Engagement

- Engage patiently on Community time, in spaces mob are comfortable, at times suitable for the Community.
- Discuss Community expectations for copyright and ICIP protections.
- Collaborate with a broad range of networks in accordance with local Community protocols, with sufficient time and resources available.



Principle 2: Cultural Integrity

- Work with Language Specialists and Language Custodians to source words and understand sound systems, Cultural meaning, pronunciation, and spelling.
- Uphold Community wishes for ICIP, ensure Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles are followed and ensure Community retains ownership and copyright over Language materials.
- Seek permission from the appropriate Aboriginal People and acknowledge Language Custodians who have shared the Language.



Principle 3: Aboriginal led

- Respect Aboriginal Peoples' right to self-determination and control over their Languages, as affirmed by UNDRIP.
- Ensure decision-making is led by Aboriginal People from start to finish.
- Avoid imposing external agendas by aligning efforts with Community goals.



Principle 4: Truth Telling and Healing

- Acknowledge the ongoing impact of colonisation and trauma, including the Stolen Generations, on Aboriginal Languages.
- Support reclamation of Aboriginal place names and use trauma-informed, Culturally safe approaches.
- Return archival materials requested by Community, support access to archives, and educate yourself on local history.

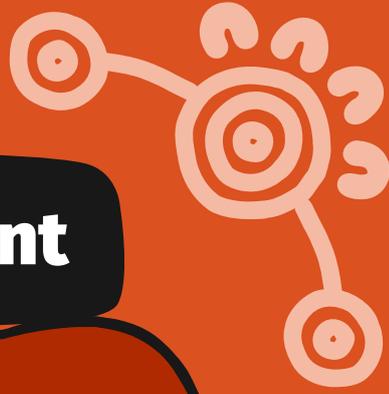


Principle 5: Reciprocity

- Give back meaningfully and fairly compensate Aboriginal People for their Cultural knowledge, time, and Cultural contributions.
- Recognise that Language use is a privilege and provide ongoing support for Language activities.
- Respect Indigenous Data Sovereignty over all collected information.

Principle 1:

Community Engagement



Listen to the Community you are working with to understand their protocols and appropriate ways to engage. This will look different in every Community depending on their Language priorities and governance structures- there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Your approaches should be underpinned by genuine relationships, patience, sensitivity, and flexibility to adapt to the needs of the Community.

Aboriginal communities are often over-engaged and over-consulted or may have limited resources dedicated to delivering on priorities specific to the Community. When engaging on Language use activities, it is important to discuss Community expectations around copyright and protection of ICIP. Each Aboriginal Community holds important Language and Cultural knowledge systems that must be protected as part of the engagement process. Mob should always understand their rights and be the leaders of this process.

There are many Aboriginal Languages and dialects across NSW, each connected to different geographic areas, sometimes in close proximity. Due to the disruption caused by colonisation, overlapping areas of Country and Language can still be contested and require sensitive, trauma-informed approaches.

Language centres, Language organisations, Language Custodians, Traditional Owners, local Aboriginal Language Specialists and speakers, the Aboriginal Languages Trust, NSW Aboriginal Land Council and Local Aboriginal Land Councils can assist in identifying the appropriate protocols for your Community.

It is important to recognise that every Community is different and at different stages of Language revitalisation. Some Communities may not be ready to share or may only have a handful of words. Others may welcome respectful partnerships that embed Language in broader contexts. The key is to speak with and listen to Aboriginal People of the area you are working with and ensure they remain in control of their Language and Cultural knowledge systems.

PICTURED (right): Sara Freeman at the NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 on Wonnarua Country. Taken by Joseph Mayers.



Community Engagement Networks

Community engagement requires collaboration with a broad range of networks in accordance with local Community protocols, with sufficient time and resources available. These roles are not mutually exclusive. Individuals may hold several responsibilities within their Community. Depending on the specific Community protocols this could include a range of groups such as:

- Local Elders
- Local business
- Local AECG
- Language Teachers
- Sole traders or unincorporated groups
- Local Language Group/s
- Language nest
- Language Specialists
- Language Custodians
- Traditional Owners
- Local Governance Groups
- Local Aboriginal Land Councils
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- Knowledge Holders

Guidance

- Review the *Aboriginal Affairs Cultural Knowledge Framework Part 2 Guidelines for researchers, government agencies and consultants working with Aboriginal Communities*.
- Provide clear written details about your project, including the context and purpose of Language use, so the Aboriginal Community can consult with relevant stakeholders.
- Plan engagement carefully and always seek permission before starting any consultation.
- Discuss matters around copyright and ICIP protocols early in the process.
- Uphold FPIC throughout all stages of planning and engagement.
- Be mindful of Sorry Business or Cultural Ceremonies that may affect timing for engagement.
- Allow adequate time for Community input, enabling discussion, approval processes, and final decision-making.
- Include check-in points during the project to ensure accountability to Community.
- Understand that Communities operate on their own timelines, not government or financial cycles.
- Prioritise building genuine relationships.
- Collaborate closely with Language Specialists involved in the work often based working in Language Centres, hubs, and as Teachers.
- Listen openly to diverse perspectives and ask respectful, open questions, such as: “*What work are you doing with your Language, and how can we support you?*”

Examples of what NOT to do

- Do not assume one person's view represents the entire Community; perspectives will vary.
- Do not expect Community members to always be available or willing to engage, as other priorities and timing can affect capacity.
- Do not schedule meetings without checking for conflicts with other Community events or priorities.
- Do not rush consultations; allow time for respectful, unhurried discussion in appropriate Community spaces such as on Country or at the location of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- Do not seek only those individuals who support your views just to advance your project.
- Remember, permission from one Aboriginal Person or co-worker does not replace genuine Community engagement.

CASE STUDY:

Community Engagement leads to better outcomes – *University of Wollongong Bega Campus*

The Aboriginal Languages Trust would like to thank Emma Stewart (Bidjigal/Yuin) for sharing this story.

The University of Wollongong's Bega Campus engaged with Language Custodians and Language Specialists to develop the Djiringanj Language Resource. At the time, I worked at the University as the Indigenous Engagement Officer. The manager of the University was committed to fostering Cultural safety within the organisation and took initiative to put this into action.

The initial idea was to place Language artwork on a door of the University. However, after Community consultations to understand local priorities and aspirations, the idea evolved into something far more meaningful. We invited key local Elders and Language Custodians into the University, showed them the space, listened to their ideas, and actioned their advice and feedback. We also spent time together outside and in Community spaces deepening our relationship and trust and learning more about Djiringanj Language and Culture.



We need to be recognised as the industry experts in Language revitalisation. Too often, non-Indigenous people take on roles they are not qualified for, undermining our authority and causing harm. Respectful use of Language requires meaningful engagement.”

– Emma Stewart (Bidjigal/Yuin)

The Community wanted local Aboriginal People to feel like the University was a space where mob belonged. A place that was proud of Aboriginal People and Culture. A place of achieving excellence while staying strong and grounded in Culture. As a result of engaging with the right people, a beautiful artwork was developed by a local Djiringanj/Ngarigo artist, accompanied by a plaque explaining the meaning and significance of the artwork in Djiringanj Language. The piece “*My Dreaming Track of Knowledge with Community and Elders*” was created. The artwork shares Cultural stories connected to the Bega Valley, showing elements like ceremony sites, walking tracks, bush food, local animals, and totems.

Local Elder and Knowledge Holder, Aunty Ellen Mundy, shared 11 words in Djiringanj Language, which have been included in a teaching resource and website to support the local Community to learn about the area and Djiringanj People’s strong connections to Country. These words and the Cultural significance shown in the artwork are a powerful part of local Language revitalisation efforts.

The artwork is now proudly displayed at the University’s main entrance as a respectful and visible acknowledgement of local Culture and Language. Licensing agreements ensure the Community always retains ownership of the Djiringanj Language Resource and makes the call on any future use. Without a Community engagement approach, this could have easily ended up being a tokenistic gesture. The result has been the creation of a Language Resource that the whole Community is proud of and that tells a story of people, place and Culture and is the catalyst for the ongoing respectful partnership with local people.

This was the first time a non-Indigenous organisation had collaborated so closely with local people. Years have passed since the launch, and the University has continued to support Community-led projects, including providing the venue for Language activities led by Community and sponsoring youth Language initiatives. Many more Community members are comfortable engaging with the campus because the University engaged with the right people and took the time needed, the outcomes have been Culturally safe, meaningful, and long lasting.

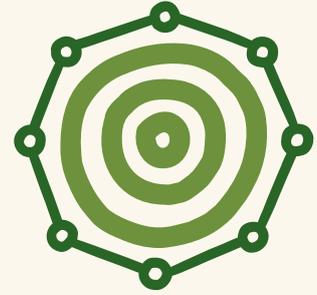
PICTURED (below): (left to right) *Emma Stewart* (Bidjigal/Yuin), University of Wollongong Indigenous Engagement Officer (2019–2023); *Bronwyn Luff* (Ngarigo/Djiringanj), *Aunty Ellen Mundy* (Ngarigo/Djiringanj); *Samantha Avitaia*, UOW Bega Campus Manager – attending the 2023 Artwork Launch event.

SOURCE: University of Wollongong Bega Campus.



Principle 2:

Cultural Integrity



Article 31 of UNDRIP affirms that *“Indigenous Peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their Cultural Heritage, Cultural knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions.”* Country owns Language. Aboriginal People have the important role of caring for Languages and ensuring they are spoken and used authentically and true to their Old People. Languages carry stories of Kinship, dreaming, and Cultural knowledge about caring for Country.

Language Specialists conduct extensive research, study sound systems, and work closely with Language Custodians to ensure proper pronunciation and assurance that traditional oral knowledge aligns with linguistic interpretations. Their work is essential to maintaining the Cultural integrity of Language used.

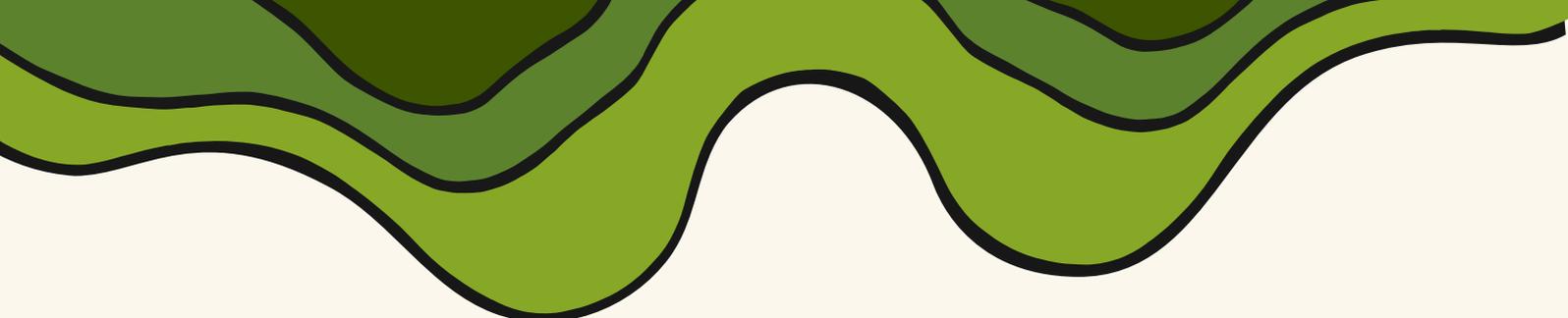
It’s also important to acknowledge that not all English words or concepts can be directly transcribed into Aboriginal Languages. Many Languages do not have equivalent words for certain modern terms or ideas. Translation requires time, careful consideration, and collaboration with Language Custodians to ensure any new terms are developed in a way that respects Cultural integrity and aligns with traditional knowledge systems.

All Cultural knowledge is sacred and connected to specific people, Culture, or places. Many families and individuals hold specific responsibilities to uphold the integrity of their Language. For example, descendants of the Old People who recorded Languages often maintain a deep connection to particular stories, songs, and Cultural knowledge. This means that if an old song belonging to a specific Elder is to be used, respectful consultation and permission must be sought from that Elder’s family.

Protocols for engaging Aboriginal Communities about Language use will vary across NSW. Failure to observe these protocols can result in misuse of Language or inaccurate pronunciation and spelling that is damaging to an organisations reputation and undermines the work being done in Aboriginal Communities.

ICIP refers to traditional and Cultural expressions passed down through generations. Each Aboriginal Community has unique ICIP that must be respected and protected. Many Communities will already have their own ICIP protocols in place that will apply to the project. FPIC should also be applied to ensure the Community is fully informed about the project and how their ICIP will be respected and protected.

Control and ownership of Languages including all written, recorded, and digital materials must remain with the local Community. This includes rights to reproduce, distribute, and commercially use Language resources. Language resources may include materials, tool, videos, images or content that supports the learning, teaching, documentation, preservation, or revitalisation of a Language. If a Language resource is created collaboratively or digitally, it may still be considered ICIP if it derives from Aboriginal knowledge, stories, or Language. Even one word used, or images of dancers, artwork or other Cultural materials could be considered a Language resource if directly connected to the Language.



Cultural integrity is upheld when external parties approach their local Community respectfully to understand protocols, seek permissions from appropriate Aboriginal People, and embed ICIP and FPIC principles into their processes. Respecting copyright and Community ownership ensures Language work benefits the collective wellbeing of the Community.

Guidance

- Follow Terri Janke and Company's True Tracks® Principles, aligned with Article 31 of UNDRIP
 - Review the *Aboriginal Languages Trust Community Guideline for Protecting Aboriginal Cultural and Intellectual Property*.
 - Follow Community processes regarding ICIP protections.
 - Ensure Community guides all Language activities and local protocols are respected.
 - Ensure conditional and limited use of Language strictly for the agreed purposes, based on permissions granted by the Community.
 - Consult recognised and authorised Aboriginal People on spelling, pronunciation, and meanings to maintain accuracy and respect.
 - Acknowledge that Language reconstruction is ongoing; spelling, sounds, and pronunciations may evolve as new knowledge emerges. Community should have the right to withdraw or modify consent if they wish to alter Language use.
 - Respect that Language reconstruction is ongoing and translations from English may require time and collaboration, as some concepts have no direct equivalent.
 - Include clear copyright notices that identify Aboriginal parties as owners of Language materials accessed or used.
 - Consider formal Licence Agreements to protect ICIP and outline terms for Language use, ensuring the Community retains control.
 - Always seek permission from Language Custodians and/or Language Specialists before using Aboriginal Languages and honour the Cultural meanings of the words.
 - Ensure Language resources remain accessible and usable by Aboriginal People, families, and Communities into the future.
 - Keep thorough records of agreed terms for Language use, including conditions for use, storage, and future access.
 - Maintain up-to-date contact details for the relevant Aboriginal Community members to support ongoing respectful relationships.
 - Provide consistent education for all new staff on Language protocols to promote respectful and informed Language use.
 - Properly acknowledge Language Custodians and their lineages when referencing Language materials.
 - Respect the decision if the Communities decide to not share their Languages
- 

Examples of what NOT to do

- Do not use Language without proper Community permission; consent from one individual does not equate to Community approval.
- Do not use Cultural teachings to create Language resources without appropriate authority.
- Do not use Language to gain advantage in contracts or services aimed at Aboriginal Communities without Community consent.
- Do not monetise Languages through business or commercial products without explicit Community consent.
- Do not lead teachings about Aboriginal Languages; this is the responsibility of Language Specialists and Language Custodians.
- Do not assert ownership or copyright over Language resources.

CASE STUDY:

Respecting our sacred Languages – *Gujaga Foundation*

The Aboriginal Languages Trust would like to thank the Gujaga Foundation for sharing this story.

The Gujaga Foundation was created through the leadership of five Senior Dharawal women who spent decades working to protect and pass on our Language and Culture. Their vision was to make sure that Dharawal Language, stories and knowledge could be taught in the right way.

Most importantly by Community, for Community, and with respect. Our aim is to ensure Dharawal children within the La Perouse Aboriginal Community grow up with a strong sense of Cultural belonging. In all our projects and work, we ensure Cultural integrity and respect for our Language is upheld. An example of upholding Cultural integrity within our work is the use of QR codes on Language displays.

These QR codes link to audio and video recordings, so people can hear the correct pronunciation of words and learn their deeper meaning. Importantly, these recordings include our Old People and knowledge holders who have the knowledge to speak about the word and its story. This ensures that the Language is spoken within context and by someone with a lived experience, to speak on the words and their stories. This ensures that the Language is not only preserved but passed on in a way that is Culturally grounded and accurate. It is essential to acknowledge those who share their knowledge and protect their contributions.



PICTURED (left): Language learning with technology.
SOURCE: Gujaga Foundation.

To uphold this, all clients are required to sign an Intellectual Property Agreement before any project begins. This agreement ensures that Community stories, Language, and Cultural content are safeguarded and cannot be reused or misrepresented without explicit permission. While we advocate for stronger recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), the legal system currently offers more protection under Western copyright law, and we use this to our advantage to protect our people's knowledge.

When these protocols are not followed, there are serious risks. These include:

- Misuse or misrepresentation of Cultural knowledge, leading to sacred knowledge becoming misused, causing spiritual and Cultural harm.
- Incorrect use/context of Language, where sacred or sensitive knowledge is shared without permission or understanding.
- Loss of Community trust, particularly when Language is taken or used out of context without proper authority.

For the La Perouse Aboriginal Community, protecting our Language is our Cultural responsibility. For us, our Language is not just words. It carries our history, identity, stories and culture. Our Language and knowledge must be shared properly, with the right people involved, and with permission. This correct context is maintained through this, ensuring our future generations of Dharawal people are strong in culture and identity.

“
For the La Perouse
Aboriginal Community,
protecting our
Language is our Cultural
responsibility. For us,
our Language is not just
words. It carries our
history, identity, stories
and culture.”
– Gujaga Foundation

PICTURED (below): Uncle Rod Mason (left) and Jonas Ingrey (right).

SOURCE: Gujaga Foundation.



Principle 3:

Aboriginal led



UNDRIP explicitly affirms Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination (Article 3), which includes the right to freely pursue their economic, social, and Cultural development, including control over their own institutions and resources. This means Indigenous Peoples have the right to lead and make decisions about their Languages, Cultures, and Knowledge Systems. Further, Article 13 recognises Indigenous Peoples' rights to maintain, control, and transmit their Cultural Heritage and Languages, including the right to protect and develop their traditional knowledge and Cultural expressions. It also places a responsibility on States to safeguard and support these rights.

Communities must have control over Language resources and decision-making processes related to their Languages. This does not exclude a role for Governments and the broader Community in supporting Community aspirations for Language revitalisation. Support from outside the Aboriginal Community is an asset when done in the right way with Community leading the process and being the final decision-makers.

Aboriginal Communities have a fundamental human right to determine what is important for their Languages, how their goals will be achieved, how their Language is used, and what it is used for. Often, even well-meaning activities can unintentionally disempower Community members' right to self-determine their futures and diminish Community ownership of their Language. This stems from a long history of Governments and other authorities assuming they know what is best for Aboriginal People.

Aboriginal Communities have plans, priorities, and dreams for their Languages that are interconnected with relationships, Kinship systems, and a deep shared connection to the history of their Country. Self-determination occurs outside Western constructs of decision-making; it happens when power rests in the hands of the Community who are working to revive and reconstruct Languages and therefore positioned to make the final decisions about what happens with their Languages.

The power of Aboriginal systems of knowing, doing, and being has yet to be fully realised by the broader Australian population, particularly in caring for the environment and land management practices. Aboriginal People are the first teachers, scientists, astronomers, farmers, and healers of Country. These ancient Cultural knowledges have been passed down for thousands of years. There is much to be learned from Aboriginal ways of knowing and being.

An Aboriginal led process will look different in each Community, depending on Aboriginal governance structures and the stage of Language revival. Regardless of these differences, all Language use activities should be Aboriginal led, with Aboriginal People in control from start to finish and beyond, acting as the final decision-makers.

Guidance

- Review existing resources to understand Community Language priorities across NSW and within your local area.
- Build your understanding of what a Community-led process looks like for the Community you are working with and fully implement good practice models as soon as possible.
- Ensure your proposed Language use activity aligns with Community goals and priorities.
- Ensure the Community are the approvers and final decision-makers of the Language used.
- Discontinue or change any activity that does not align with these goals.
- Rather than imposing ideas, ask the Community group how Language can be used respectfully in your region (see Principle 1 – Community Engagement).
- Offer opportunities for teaching outside classrooms on Country, as the Community sees fit.
- Provide access to Country to support Community-led Language work and review your processes to ensure there are no barriers to Community accessing Country.
- Ensure Aboriginal People lead Language projects and retain ownership throughout and beyond.
- Acknowledge Language as a strength in teaching, caring for Country, governance, and environmental management.
- Aboriginal People must be the teachers of their Languages in all educational and organisational settings.
- Aboriginal People must decide which Language is used in any Language activity.

Examples of what NOT to do

- Do not name a building or project in Language without consultation and a Community led process.
- Do not seek to use Language in public signage as an afterthought or without meaningful consultation with the Aboriginal Community.
- Non-indigenous people teaching Language and creating Language resources is usually not accepted without close consultation and Community leadership over the process.
- Do not approach Community with pre-set funding criteria for Language projects; organisational goals should adapt to meet Community needs.
- Do not announce a new Language use activity without involving the Community - the process must be collaborative from the start.



CASE STUDY:

Mara Ngali: Two Hands Working Together – *Tamworth Regional Council and Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO)*

The Aboriginal Languages Trust would like to thank Marc Sutherland (Gomeroi) for sharing this story.

The Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal-Controlled Community Organisations (TACCO) is a coalition of five longstanding Aboriginal led Organisations that provide a strong, united voice for thousands of Aboriginal People across the Tamworth region. TACCO ensures Closing the Gap initiatives are Aboriginal led and that Community priorities sit at the heart of all decision-making.

TACCO's strength lies in its deep Cultural and Community connections, made up of leaders positioned to understand and respond to the needs of our people, addressing a range of issues under Closing the Gap, including the revitalisation of Gomeroi Language.

One of the first major conversations TACCO had was with the Regional Council about creating a formal partnership named in Language to represent the collaboration on Closing the Gap. It might sound like a small step, but this naming was deeply important. Using Gomeroi Language to name a formal agreement the first of its kind was not just symbolic; it mattered deeply to Community because it grounded the partnership in our Cultural identity and connection.

We chose the name *Mara Ngali*, which means “Our Two Hands.” Unlike English words that describe things, our traditional Language teaches us how to be. *Mara Ngali* speaks to balance, equality, and shared responsibility like two hands working together. That's the true spirit of this partnership. It is based on our Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Being. It captures the essence of what partnership is about: two hands working together in everything we do, ensuring Aboriginal People lead the way in decisions affecting our Community, supported by the Council.



***When Language guides us,
and Aboriginal Communities
lead the process and when
governments slow down,
listen, and respect cultural
protocols the outcomes are
meaningful and lasting.”***

– Marc Sutherland (Gomeroi)

Getting the Language right took time and care. TACCO led the way, holding many meetings over several months, bringing the name and its meaning back through their respective boards and members. TACCO followed Cultural protocols, engaging with Community and ensuring the name honoured our Community values. Once settled on, the Council embraced the name with respect and support no questions asked. It was understood that the process needed to be Aboriginal led and belong to Community. That showed how far we had come together.

In June 2025, we officially signed the Mara Ngali Agreement, a historic moment marking the first time in Australia a local government signed a formal partnership with an Aboriginal Community governance body. It was a proud moment and the start of ensuring Aboriginal led decisions not only for our Language but for a range of other issues impacting our Community.

This journey has shown me that when Language guides us, and Aboriginal Communities lead the process, and when governments slow down, listen, and respect Cultural protocols, the outcomes are meaningful and lasting. Mara Ngali is more than a name it is a Way of Being that has guided our people for thousands of years, reminding us of our interconnectedness and shared responsibility.

PICTURED (right): Councillor Marc Sutherland (Gomeri) pictured at the official signing of the Tamworth Regional Council and TACCO Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement 2025.
SOURCE: Marc Sutherland (Gomeri).



Principle 4:

Truth Telling and Healing

Prior to Colonisation, Aboriginal People across NSW flourished in a society governed by strong Lore and Customs, enjoying good health and a deep connection to Country that had been unbroken for thousands of years. Colonisation had devastating impacts on Aboriginal People, resulting in the widespread suppression of Languages, a loss still deeply felt across Communities today.

Truth-telling requires us to reflect honestly on the ongoing harmful impacts of Colonisation on Aboriginal Languages throughout NSW. Globalisation further contributes to the erosion of traditional practices by prioritising western ways of being. This dominance shapes how our children are taught and learn, the books we read, the media we consume, and our daily lives. This form of institutional racism diminishes the sacredness of Aboriginal Languages, causing further loss and harm for Aboriginal Communities.

The *Bringing Them Home* Report details the systemic removal of Aboriginal children from their families under child welfare laws, placing them in institutions or with non-Aboriginal families to assimilate them into Western society. Language was neither spoken nor valued in these contexts, devastating the transmission of Languages across generations and severing connections to Country, people, and Culture. The past cannot be separated from the present, it is the legacy of this history that shapes where we are today.

Aboriginal People continue to face significant challenges in reclaiming their Languages. A key barrier, noted by many Aboriginal People across NSW, is the red tape and difficulties involved in accessing Language materials from archives, transcripts, and audio recordings. Researching a sleeping Language is an extremely sensitive and complex process, made more difficult by the inaccessibility of information. Much archival material was collected through a colonial lens, often reflecting biased or incomplete perspectives.

Truth-telling in place-naming is critical. Settler colonialism deliberately replaced Aboriginal place names with English ones, erasing Indigenous Languages' vital role in describing, mapping, and teaching about place and Country. It also imposed names honouring controversial figures such as Captain Cook and Governor Macquarie. Today, a growing Community movement is working to restore truth by reinstating Aboriginal place names.

Using Aboriginal Languages in the right way is a process of truth-telling and healing not only for Aboriginal Communities but for everyone. Beginning from a place of truth and healing helps to strengthen trust and build the respectful relationships needed for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal Languages.

Guidance

- Spend time building genuine relationships with the Community, educating yourself to develop a deep understanding of the purpose and significance behind your project.
- Take initiative to raise awareness of the urgent need for support and resourcing for Aboriginal Languages.
- Seek opportunities to learn directly from local Aboriginal People and Language Custodians.
- Use Indigenous literature authored by, or developed in partnership with, Aboriginal People.
- Acknowledge any role your organisation or profession has played in past policies that caused harm to Aboriginal Peoples.
- Actively support Aboriginal events such as Sorry Day as an ally.
- Recognise the ongoing impacts of colonisation and past policies on Aboriginal People today.
- Acknowledge the continuous pressures faced by Aboriginal Languages in the present day.
- Recognise the historical impact of English on Aboriginal Languages, including through place-naming practices that contributed to their suppression and loss.
- Review the *Aboriginal Dual Names Policy* by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, along with the *Dual Names Standards*.
- Support Community-led aspirations and initiatives in Aboriginal place naming.
- Embrace decolonial and Indigenous methodologies when approaching and working with Languages.
- Apply trauma-informed approaches throughout all stages of your work.
- Return or provide access to materials, archives, data or records held by your organisation.
- Review and adapt policies and procedures to ensure the process of returning materials is straightforward and accessible.
- Research the colonial history relevant to the Community you work with to better understand context and impact.
- Complete formal Cultural learning and training to enhance respectful engagement.
- Respect the sensitivities surrounding significant events (such as January 26th and the national anthem) and other contexts where Language use may not be appropriate.

Examples of what NOT to do

- Do not engage in Language activities if you're unwilling to understand the ongoing impact of colonisation.
- Avoid using colonial-named spaces (e.g. the "Captain James Cook" room) for Language or Cultural activities.
- Do not share Aboriginal histories or Cultural knowledge outside the context in which it was shared with you.
- Make sure the name being used has meaning and don't seek Language because it sounds nice.



CASE STUDY:

Healing Together – NSW Language Legislation

The Aboriginal Languages Trust would like to thank Raymond Kelly (Dhanggati/Gumbaynggirr) for sharing this story.

On 17 October 2017, the *Aboriginal Languages Act 2017* was passed through the NSW Legislative Assembly, marking a moment of truth and healing. It was the first time Aboriginal Languages were not only recognised by the State but spoken about at the highest level as something sacred and powerful. This moment marked the first time an Aboriginal Language was recorded in Hansard, the formal parliamentary record.

On that day, I spoke about kiparras, those traditional gathering places where our people came together to discuss, debate, and make decisions. I see a strong connection between those spaces and the very floor of the parliament. Our ways of governing, leading, and speaking as a Community have always been there. They have never gone away; they've just been pushed aside for too long.

Standing in that chamber with men, women, mothers and mob of all ages speaking many tongues from many Language groups, I spoke and sung the song of the Seven Sisters. This song, in the tongue of my Old people, was shared not only to those in the room but also to the spirits of the Elders who came before us to honour those who paved the way for this moment when our Language was recognised at the highest level of today's political framework in NSW. A traditional Message Stick Ceremony was held to mark the sharing of good news and signify the significance of the bill, which was passed to acknowledge, nurture, and grow Languages.

That day, Culture met western ways in the middle with respect, healing, and truth, showing us that when done in the right way, Language is a key part of the healing process even though there is still a way to go. This was a special occasion. The bill gave us a framework and some financial support, which is important, but the real work, the real heart of it, is happening back on Country. Our Communities sit down with one another, have those hard conversations, share leadership, tell the truth about what has happened to us and what we have lost, and start rewriting our own destinies together.



Over the years many sacrifices were made as Elders in our Communities with little or nothing continued to teach our kids and tell them about their sense of belonging and place in a country that, at times, did not honour that.”

– Raymond Kelly (Dhanggati/
Gumbaynggirr)

While this legislation was a significant pillar in our healing journey, this work is not new. It's not something Aboriginal People only recently started pushing for. Our fight to keep Language, Culture, and identity alive has been ongoing since the earliest days of resistance, since the time of the Aboriginal Protection Board, which removed our children who were loved and cared for from their families and Country. Even then, our Old People fought against these injustices and spoke up about the importance of our Languages to who we are as a people.

Our people have all faced historical dislocation and displacement from Country, land, and leadership. Truth telling and healing means recognising the pain, the loss, and the incredible resilience of our people. It means calling out the systems and reclaiming the power of our Language as a tool for healing.

The preamble to the legislation formally documents these truths, stating: *“due to past policies of this Government, Aboriginal Languages were almost lost but were spoken in secret and passed on through Aboriginal families and Communities.”* This day in the chamber was many mobs, many voices, many Languages and many stories. Men, women, mothers, and young people all spoke and sang, uniting many tongues in one powerful moment for our people.

This day, Language was used outside of Community and within the walls of Government to heal and come together to tell the truth, and bring back Languages.

PICTURED (below): *Dr Raymond Kelly* (Dhanggati/Gumbaynggirr) speaking on the Aboriginal Languages Bill 2017.

SOURCE: Aboriginal Languages Trust.



Principle 5:

Reciprocity



Reciprocity means giving back in long-term, meaningful ways that respect Aboriginal People's Cultural knowledge systems, time, and energy. When Aboriginal Language is used outside of Community, it must benefit the Aboriginal People connected to the Language. Language carries story, Culture, and sacred Cultural knowledges passed down for generations and sharing it is a significant responsibility.

Preparing Language for use outside of the Community involves substantial time and expertise. Language Specialists and Language Custodians will carefully determine appropriate Language for each context researching, considering alternatives, applying linguistic knowledge, and seeking Community approval before sharing words or sentences.

Language is not a commodity or service to be simply accessed. Organisations using Language must engage in genuine partnerships and demonstrate reciprocity. Even publicly available Language requires proper permissions and respectful processes. Using Aboriginal Languages is a privilege, reflecting Community generosity rather than an entitlement.

Remuneration is an important part of reciprocity. It demonstrates that Aboriginal Peoples' time, expertise, and knowledge are valued, and it ensures that the time spent assisting organisations can be reinvested into core Language work. Reciprocity includes not only remunerating people for their time but also providing ongoing support to the Community. Organisations should respect Indigenous Data Sovereignty when collecting information, ensuring Communities are in control of how their data is used, shared, and contributes to evaluating broader Language revitalisation efforts.

Reciprocity is inseparable from the relationships and trust built over time. Maintaining integrity in Language use involves ongoing ethical commitment and self-reflection on how an organisation gives back. Some industries or organisations may have caused harm to Aboriginal People or Country, leading Communities to withhold Language sharing.

The exchange around Language use is not transactional but relational rooted in core values of integrity and respecting Aboriginal Peoples roles as caretakers of Culture and Country.

Guidance

- Consider engaging an experienced Aboriginal business or consultant who values and understands the principles of Aboriginal Language use and can guide the process.
- Communities must maintain ownership over their ICIP and share in any economic benefits that arise from the use and teaching of Aboriginal Languages.
- Recognise Community as the rightful owners and protectors of their Cultural knowledge systems.
- Pay all contributors fairly for their time and Cultural Knowledge and ensure there is an allocated budget that remunerates people at a rate that values Cultural knowledge as determined by Community.
- Consider how your organisation creates job opportunities for local Aboriginal People and its broader commitment beyond Language use.
- Recognise Community benefits as a key measure of project success.
- Work with Community to identify long-term ways the Community can benefit from your Language activity.
- Continue to fund or support Community-led Language initiatives in line with the Community's aspirations.
- Support and provide access to Country that may be held by your organisation for Language learning and teaching.
- Ensure all data is stored in formats and platforms that can be accessed by Community and provide ongoing updates on how it's being used.
- Establish clear agreements and processes for how Community can access, review and change or remove data collected and have early conversations about Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
- Share data findings in ways that support Community goals and priorities
- All funding agreements should include ICIP protections and consider licencing agreements.

Examples of what NOT to do

- Do not treat the use of Language (e.g. signage) as “doing a favour” for Aboriginal People.
- Avoid set payment amounts that you will offer – instead, ask the appropriate Aboriginal People for a quote.
- Do not use Language just to tick a box – ensure it is meaningful and Community-led.
- Do not expect people to contribute their time, Cultural knowledge, or labour without fair payment.

CASE STUDY:

Ngukalil ‘I give, you give’ – Gathangga Wakulda Aboriginal Corporation

The Aboriginal Languages Trust would like to thank Gulwanyang Moran (Birrbyay/Dhaggati) for sharing this story.

Gathangga Wakulda Aboriginal Corporation is our local Language body. We play a vital role in supporting Gathang Language educators across our Language revitalisation region. Our corporation operates in partnership with Djuyalgu Wakulda, the Northern Birrbyay Language governance group, and other groups representing surrounding geographical areas. Our strong governance structure has been developed over the last decade and is giving voice to all mobs across the region. As part of this, we have established processes and agreements, agreed to by all relevant Language representatives, to guide how we do things.

One way we have shared our Language is through our partnership with Sea Acres Rainforest Centre in Guruk, Port Macquarie. Sea Acres National Park is the Traditional Country of the Birrbyay People who have been connected to Country for thousands of years. It is a centre situated in a rainforest with deep Cultural significance for local Aboriginal People. Our Language holds deep Cultural knowledge of its plants and bushtucker. It is a place of Cultural education and connection.

What started with Sea Acres asking for just ten words grew into a collaborative relationship lasting over a year and a half. During that time, we didn’t just provide translations; we recorded our people speaking the Language and telling stories and created QR codes to educate visitors and provide ongoing professional development for staff. This ensured Sea Acres staff learned proper pronunciation to protect and honour our Language. We consulted with Kinship groups and continually reviewed the Language to ensure it reflected the Cultural knowledge and seasonal changes important to the area. This long-term engagement shows that reciprocity is much more than a simple transaction it’s about genuine connection and relationships built on trust.

If you visit Sea Acres, you’ll see beautiful Birrbyay Language and art installations created by local artists. The careful use of correct Language and Cultural knowledge highlights the deep collaboration between Sea Acres Rainforest Centre and our local Aboriginal Communities, sharing our traditional stories of the seasons, plants, and Country in a way that respects our Culture, people, and traditions.

“

It hasn’t just been ‘we want Language and that’s it.’ We live by the saying Ngukalil – ‘I give, you give’ – because true reciprocity is about sharing and respect, not just taking.”

– Gulwanyang Moran (Birrbyay/Dhaggati)

We have established strong Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property processes to protect our Language materials, stories, and recordings in ways specific to our Community. Our Community owns the copyright over any materials we share. Whenever organisations like Sea Acres use our Language, they enter into a licensing agreement that ensures our Language Specialists are remunerated appropriately. It also protects our copyright and limits Language use to the agreed purpose. If an organisation wants to use the Language again, they need permission and approval from our governance group. This system gives our Community control over our Cultural knowledge, prevents misuse or exploitation, and ensures our people’s time and knowledge is valued.

Djuyalgu Wakulda has a Language request form that must be completed for us to consider working on Language use projects, with set fee structures and clear scopes of service. The funds we receive from these licensing agreements, including those with Sea Acres, go directly back into our Community. This reinvestment creates meaningful economic opportunities for our local Aboriginal People and ensures the benefits of our Language work flows directly to our mob.

PICTURED (below): Birrbay Language and art installations at Sea Acres in Guruk (Port Macquarie).
SOURCE: Sea Acres Rainforest Centre.



Checklist for engaging Aboriginal Communities on Language Use activities

<input type="checkbox"/>	You have identified and approached a broad range of networks in accordance with local Community protocols (Principle 1: Community Engagement)
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have given the Community adequate time to consider and respond to the proposed Language use activity in line with FPIC principles (Principle 1: Community Engagement).
<input type="checkbox"/>	There is an agreement about how you will consult and work with the Community (Principle 1: Community Engagement).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have confirmed the appropriate words, spelling, pronunciation, and Cultural meaning with recognised Language Custodians and/or Specialists (Principle 2: Cultural Integrity).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have ensured that the Community retains ownership and copyright of any Language materials or recordings created through the activity (Principle 2: Cultural Integrity).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have built genuine relationships and engaged respectfully on Community time, following local protocols and ensuring Aboriginal People lead decision-making about Language (Principle 1: Community Engagement; Principle 3: Aboriginal Led).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have ensured Community are the approvers and final decision-makers of the Language used (Principle 3: Aboriginal Led).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have acknowledged the Language Custodians who shared the Language, in all materials and communications and these have been approved by the Aboriginal People involved (Principle 2: Cultural Integrity).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have agreed to provide the Community with copies of all materials, recordings, research, and reporting, consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles (Principle 5: Reciprocity).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have acknowledged the ongoing impact of colonisation and supported truth-telling and healing through respectful and Culturally safe Language use (Principle 4: Truth Telling and Healing).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have negotiated fair payment for the Community's time, Cultural knowledge, and Cultural expertise (Principle 5: Reciprocity).
<input type="checkbox"/>	You have maintained transparency, accountability, and commitment to ongoing relationships beyond the completion of the project (Principle 5: Reciprocity).

Key Aboriginal Peak Organisations

Acronym	Role/Focus	Website	Contact
Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW)			
AECG	Supports Aboriginal education in NSW schools	www.aecg.nsw.edu.au	info@aecg.nsw.edu.au
New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council			
NSWALC	Land rights, Cultural heritage, advocacy	www.alc.org.au	reception@alc.org.au
Aboriginal Languages Trust			
ALT	Language revitalisation and support across NSW	www.alt.org.au	info@alt.org.au
Local Aboriginal Land Councils			
LALCs	Local Community land management and Community focus	www.alc.org.au/land-council-map	Varies by region

Risk Matrix

Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Risk Level	Relevant Principle(s)	Mitigation / Controls
Language use without proper Community permission or consent	Cultural harm; loss of trust; Community backlash; misuse of Language	Medium-High	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 1; • Principle 2 	Ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); engage respectfully with Aboriginal People.
Non-Indigenous people teaching Language and creating Language resources.	Cultural harm; Loss of trust; Community backlash; misuse of Language/ legal disputes	Medium-High	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 1; • Principle 2; • Principle 3 	Community members must lead Language teachings from start to finish for the long-term. Establish and honour Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) agreements detailing what can be taught without Community presence and ensure Aboriginal Community have copyright of Language resources and resources containing Cultural knowledge.
Ignoring or bypassing Community-led decision-making and governance structures	Disempowerment of Communities; project failure; loss of Cultural integrity; undermines Community Language work	Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 1; • Principle 3 	Ensure Aboriginal leadership and final decision-making; understand and respect local governance and protocols.
Mispronunciation, misspelling, or inappropriate use of Language	Loss of Cultural integrity; disrespect to Community; undermines Community Language work.	Medium	Medium - High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 2 	Consult recognised Language Specialists and Language Custodians on pronunciation, spelling, and meaning; review and verify usage before release.
Failure to respect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights	Legal issues; Cultural disrespect; loss of Community trust	Medium	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 1; • Principle 2 	Apply ICIP principles; respect ownership and copyright; formalise agreements through licences or contracts; include copyright disclaimers.

Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Risk Level	Relevant Principle(s)	Mitigation / Controls
Inadequate understanding of the ongoing impacts of colonisation and trauma on Communities	Harmful engagement; perpetuating racism; reduced Community participation	High	High	• Principle 4	Complete Cultural competency and trauma-informed training; reflect on organisational history; approach work with sensitivity and humility.
Lack of reciprocity and meaningful benefit to the Community from Language use	Disrespect to Cultural knowledge and time; loss of trust; damaged relationships; Community disengagement	Medium	High	• Principle 5	Build genuine partnerships; remunerate Aboriginal people; provide ongoing support; ensure projects benefit the Community long-term.
Non-Aboriginal organisations using Language for commercial gain without Community benefit	Exploitation; loss of Community control; cultural harm	Low	High	• Principle 2; • Principle 3	Ensure full Community control over commercial use through formal agreements.
Inappropriate disclosure or sharing of sensitive Aboriginal histories or Cultural knowledge	Cultural harm; breach of trust; damaged relationships	Low	High	• Principle 1; • Principle 4	Share information only within agreed contexts; respect confidentiality and sensitivities; seek guidance from Custodians.
Failure to respect Community timing, capacity, or Sorry Business when engaging	Poor engagement; strained relationships; ineffective outcomes	Medium	Medium	• Principle 1	Plan flexibly; consult Communities about timing; allow for Cultural events and healing processes; build genuine relationships.
Use of Language without ongoing Community involvement or leadership throughout the project	Loss of Cultural integrity; project failure; Community disengagement	Medium	High	• Principle 1; • Principle 5	Ensure Aboriginal People lead projects start to finish; maintain Community control post-completion; embed Community governance.
Lack of education/ training for staff on Cultural protocols and Language use	Unintentional disrespect; inconsistent application of protocols	Medium	Medium	• Principle 1; • Principle 2	Provide ongoing cultural learning and training; enforce protocols in organisations; educate new staff.



PICTURED: Photo taken by David Rogers at Tanja on Djiringanj Country.



Contact Us

For more information and to connect, contact us at:

 alt.nsw.gov.au

 [AboriginalLanguagesTrust](https://www.facebook.com/AboriginalLanguagesTrust)

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