

Land claim and native title archives survey

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AIATSIS conducted a survey from 17 December 2020 to 1 February 2021 to gauge the amount, nature and state of materials held in private archives of land and native title claim practitioners. The survey is part of the *Land rights in the Northern Territory: Documenting the records and memories case study of the Returning native title materials project*. The case study aims to return control of appropriate materials, held in those archives, back into the hands of the relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The survey was sent directly to known practitioners from the Northern Territory land claims era, which started in the 1970s. It was advertised on native title practitioner networks and via the AIATSIS and PBC websites to include archives covering native title claims starting in the early 1990s.

54 practitioners responded and completed the survey in part or fully. Of the respondents, five worked on Northern Territory land claims before 1976, 30 worked during the 1976–1985 period, and 34 respondents worked on land claims and native title claims from 1986–1996. These periods were chosen to capture the most vulnerable materials.



Time is of the essence

The survey results highlight that time is of the essence for both the materials themselves and the practitioners who recorded them, to engage with the issues around the considerable volume of materials currently not accessible.

Because of the age, in some cases over 40 years, and the outdated technical formats of materials, these research collections are vulnerable and at high risk of being damaged or becoming indecipherable. Particularly all magnetic tape materials that has not been digitised are at risk irretrievably lost by 2025.

The memories of now aged claimants and practitioners have often diminished with the passing of time. Some memories are lost as people have passed on.

Furthermore, if materials are left in the estates of archive holders they are at risk of not being identified as invaluable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and might be discarded.

The memories and documents are more valuable while we are alive than after we have gone, adding narrative makes it much more valuable than if someone looks at it afterwards without the narrative...

We as a generation were privileged to hear stories from people who hadn't written stories down for 60,000 years...In 5–10 years it won't be available anymore, because we [may not] won't be here.
– Professor Michael Dodson AM

Some data on the archives

The survey established that 82% of the respondents have materials stored at home. Where there was insufficient space 16% found off site storage. Other storage locations included work offices, libraries, land councils and other organisations involved in land claim work.

Many of the archives are at various stages of documentation.

12 respondents have not documented their archives at all, 5 documented some (25%), 3 established the content of half (50%) their collections, 4 documented most (75%) and only 5 have a clear picture of the entire content of their holdings.

The volume of hardcopy materials also varies greatly, with 23 respondents holding 1–10 archive boxes, 8 holding 10–20 boxes, 6 store 20–50 boxes, and 6 have large archives of more than 50 boxes. Similarly, varied is the volume of digital archives.

The archives include anthropological, linguistic, historical, archaeological and legal research documents, field notes, photographs, audio-visual recordings, drafts of genealogies

and maps, cassette tapes and a range of other media. Most of the survey respondents hold vulnerable materials (see Graph 2) and 11% are unsure, but 73% know that their collections contain materials they hold the only copy of.

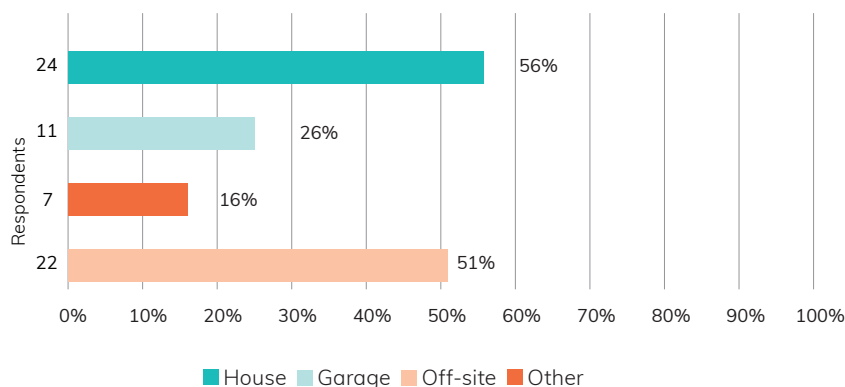
The survey data clearly demonstrates that there are great volumes of archives that are not accounted for or documented. There is a great urgency to make progress in documenting these archives and make them available. The Northern Territory land claim case study is working on progress by:

- securing support to ensure the safety, preservation and documentation of land claim materials

- encouraging practitioners to begin preparing a record of their own materials
- working towards new approaches to cataloguing, digitising and managing returns to enable and facilitate appropriate access
- recording and publishing practitioner and claimant memories.

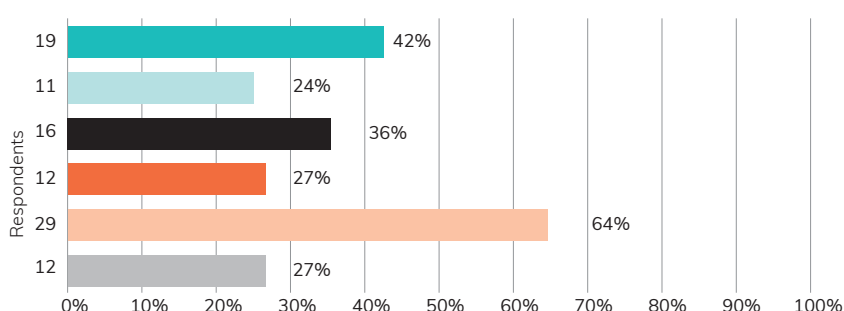
A [do-it-yourself guide](#) and template for archive holders to begin preparing their collections for potential depositing and returning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is now available.

Graph 1: What type or storage do you use for your archive?



	Responses	Percentage
I do not have a digital archive	12	26%
Fewer than 100 files	3	7%
100–200 files	6	13%
200–500 files	4	9%
500–1000 files	4	9%
more than 1000 files	17	37%

Graph 2: What types of vulnerable materials do you hold?



I feel very strongly that the descendants of the claimant involved should be able to access these materials in the future. This has implications for: the form in which the archive exists; how well it is archived and indexed; and what kind of institution is the most appropriate holder.

– Survey respondent

- Files in computer programs no longer supported
- Electronic storage media not backed up elsewhere
- Audio recording storage media not digitised elsewhere
- Video recording storage media not digitised elsewhere
- Photographic storage media not digitised
- Other