

Culture in practice: Using the AIATSIS archives to maintain native title rights and interests

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AIATSIS currently hold a large collection of information relating to Indigenous communities around Australia. The collection covers diverse areas of cultural knowledge including languages, songs, ceremonies in addition to community and personal histories. The collection is largely built from materials generated from its research grants – which has supported critical research in Indigenous law and policy – including funding for Eddie Koiki Mabo’s original cultural mapping on Mer. These materials are deposited or donated to AIATSIS which is now working to ensure materials are returned to communities where they belong.

One of the benefits of the AIATSIS collection has been the ability for Indigenous communities to use it as a knowledge base when researching for land and native title claims - which has been achieved in a vast number of communities around the country. Within this post-determination context, the focus has now shifted toward maintaining and benefiting from the rights and interests that are attached to a positive determination of native title. The aforementioned collection of materials and the infrastructure surrounding it can then be used to assist with cultural strengthening and resurgence.

An example of the AIATSIS archives being used for this purpose occurred in partnership with the Karajarri People, who are from the Kimberley region in Western Australia. The Karajarri People were the beneficiaries of a decision that gave them exclusive possession over 32,000 square kilometres of previously unallocated crown land. Stemming from this, Karajarri entered into an Indigenous Protection Agreement (IPA), giving them greater control over the protection and continued maintenance of their land.



This was in part implemented through the introduction of various ranger programs across their respective lands.

With assistance from AIATSIS through the Preserve, Strengthen, Renew Project, the Karajarri People in partnership with Environmental System Solution set up a Digital Database. This was designed to assist the facilitation of the IPA through tracking and managing the programs and ranger project. The database also acts as an archive for the collection of cultural materials that can be drawn on to strengthen the practice of their culture as well as safeguard their cultural information for future generations. Having the technological infrastructure in place to store and share this information will ensure knowledge is kept in the right hands, promoting cultural resurgence.

Given the amount of information AIATSIS has in its archives and the infrastructure that has been built around it, it's encouraging that it can now be used to assist Indigenous Peoples to make the most of the rights and interests that come after native title is recognised in the courts. The future of cultural knowledge and the intersection of data sovereignty and intellectual property will continue to have emergent challenges. But with challenges come opportunities if we're brave enough to put ourselves at the front of the pack. If an organisation like AIATSIS keeps Traditional Owners and their rights to their materials and information – their data sovereignty – at the front of our approach, we can hopefully assist Traditional Owners to rebuild their knowledge and ensure it remains in their hands.