

Guidelines for Interpreting  
Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Culture and Country

# Interpreting Culture and Country



**Interpretation**  
AUSTRALIA

Work-in-progress  
December 2006

**These Guidelines are a work in progress—supporting the possibility of working together.**

Respecting Culture: one of the most important themes in the whole document is the need for respect, respect for people and respect for culture, respect for difference and complexity.

*Rachel Faggetter, Guidelines Project Convenor, August 2006*

## Introduction

The Interpretation Australia Association (IAA), founded in 1992, is a professional association of interpreters of Australia's natural and cultural heritage. Members work in organisations such as national parks, keeping places, museums, botanic gardens and zoos. Others are involved in academic teaching and research, writing, graphic design, multi-media or in heritage organisations across Australia.

In September 2002 the Adnyamathanha community at Iga Warta in the northern Flinders Ranges hosted Yarns Across Cultures, a National Workshop and the Annual General Meeting of IAA. Many issues relating to the interpretation of Indigenous heritage were discussed. Much of the debate centred on the control and representation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Who speaks for whom?

There were two major results from this workshop:

1. Delegates resolved that a working group should develop guidelines for the interpretation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian heritage, based on the ideas and opinions expressed at the Workshop.
2. Delegates passed a resolution which declared that **only** Aboriginal people can interpret Aboriginal culture. This has become known as the Iga Warta Statement.

IAA established a small working group to shape the notes from the Iga Warta workshop into Guidelines, explore practical ways of achieving the ideals of the Iga Warta Statement and invite comments on early drafts.

In September 2003 IAA National Conference in Melbourne resolved to circulate this document widely as a working draft for two years for further refinement and testing in practice. Many comments were received and have been incorporated in this December 2006 version which continues as a work-in-progress.

## Who are the guidelines for?

IAA members, and individuals, public agencies, community organisations and private companies working as interpreters or guides in the area of natural and cultural heritage, or planning interpretive projects.

This is a working document, intended to assist staff at every level of management, planning and operations; to guide tourism planning and delivery of programs and publications; and for whole agency cultural change.

## Why Interpret?

Natural heritage cannot be interpreted without the acknowledgement and recognition of Australia's Indigenous peoples. Through interpretation we are able to create a greater understanding and appreciation of our cultural beliefs and values, whilst protecting significant places in the natural environment. Our culture is unique and our role as custodians of the land is to care for country. "The land is the story teller, we are just the messengers".

*Chontarle Pitulej, (Nyoongar) 2004 ©*

The first IAA National Conference at Deakin University, Melbourne in November 1992 passed the Deakin Declaration:

"Interpretation is the means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people enrich their understanding and appreciation of the world and their role within it. We believe that interpretation makes an essential contribution to the conservation of Australia's natural, social and cultural heritage by raising public awareness and creating opportunities for understanding, appreciation and enjoyment."

*Interpretation Australia Association 1992*

All interpreters engage with people. They answer visitor curiosity, and meet their needs and interests by sharing stories, ideas and experiences. They explain, guide, reveal, arrange, question, share and provoke. Interpreters must know how to respectfully create communication connections between people and place, past and present, people and people.

People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will towards life. Because of this richness, country is home, love and peace, nourishment for body, mind and spirit, heart's ease.

*Deborah Bird Rose 'Nourishing Terrains' 1996*

## Language and Words

We are in a time of transition and change. Language is very powerful, and its use demands knowledge and sensitivity. Interpreters should always ask about names and naming. How does each community wish to be named?

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (ATSI)

ATSI is current official terminology. Indigenous may also be acceptable. Some people prefer Aboriginal Australians, or Indigenous Australians, or Aboriginal people.

These names are essentially settler terms, inventions for bureaucratic convenience. There is no single Indigenous culture, but many, and the scene is complex. Indigenous Australians live and work in big cities and suburbs, in Top End and desert communities, on Torres Strait islands, in country towns and in many different Aboriginal communities on country throughout the nation. Each community has its own name.

In this document we have varied the language as seemed appropriate to the context. Always use uppercase for Aboriginal and Indigenous when referring to particular people or places.

### Non-Indigenous Australians

Non-Indigenous Australians is a current general term, but most Aboriginal communities have their own name for non-Indigenous people. For instance: *Gubba* in some regions of Victoria, *Balliner/Balanda* in some regions of the Northern Territory. In cross-cultural discourse, *mainstream* is often used. *Settler* is less common, but can be useful. White or European are inaccurate. Again, the rule of thumb is to listen and ask, don't assume.

### Heritage

Heritage is dynamic, complex and integrated. It includes tangible and intangible expressions of the relationships with and between country, people, beliefs, knowledge, law, language, symbols, ways of living and objects. Indigenous heritage places are landscapes, sites and areas that are particularly important to Indigenous people and reflect Indigenous heritage values.

The whole continent of Australia, land and sea, is an Aboriginal cultural site, occupied by many different Aboriginal communities for well over 40,000 years. It is not just one country, but many countries. There is no 'natural' place in Australia that is not Indigenous country, no place which is not a cultural landscape. Every river, mountain or sea, every place, is known and named, sung, valued and incorporated into culture, over thousands of years. The European explorers and white settlers did not name rivers and mountains. They re-named them. They were already part of Country.

The separate categories *natural*, *cultural* and *Indigenous* to describe particular kinds of heritage may still be useful in certain circumstances, but for Aboriginal Australians they are inseparable. Heritage is the unity, the continuum and the connectivity of natural and cultural, from earliest times, through the history of contact and up to the present moment.

### Acknowledgement - The naming of names

Acknowledgement of the custodians or traditional owners of country is an important aspect of recognition and respect.

Where are you? Whose land are you on? Name the people and name the country. We have moved beyond the generic term 'Aborigine', to the power of the naming of names. Ending anonymity is important for people and important for place. When the colonial explorers named geographical features, they obliterated the names these places had

carried for thousands of years. The explorers didn't name, they re-named. The landscape was already mapped and named, incorporated into a coherent system of knowledge and culture.

### **Consultation or Negotiation?**

If the aim is to produce an agreed vision through a respectful process of discussion, the word 'negotiation' may be more appropriate. For some people 'consultation' has become a somewhat debased term, with a history of perfunctory and ill-informed processes, and even bad faith. In the final analysis it is the quality of the process of working together, the quality of the collaboration, which determines the result.

### **Owners? Custodians? Traditional?**

Always ask which term a community prefers.

### **Native Title**

This has been a dominant factor in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for over ten years. It is complex, but interpreters need to be familiar with the Mabo and Wik judgements, and the situation in the local community about the claimants and the local Native Title claimant organisation.

### **Relationship to Country**

Indigenous communities and individuals have a special relationship and connectedness with their own country. Many say they belong to their land, not that the land belongs to them. They are located in one place, their country. This has special implications for interpreters working for statewide agencies whose staff can be transferred from place to place, from time to time. Aboriginal people living in urban areas, the majority in fact, still identify strongly with their country.

### **Who can speak for Country?**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people interpret for their own country but not for any other community's country, unless they have been given permission. All people should respect and understand this.

## Interpretive Principles

### **RELATIONSHIPS: working together with community ... listen-ask-listen**

- Aim to create long-term relationships of trust, respect and honesty.
- Identify the relevant communities and organisations, and know how to communicate with them.
- Know and observe the correct protocols for each community.
- Understand the central role of Elders, both men and women. Approach them with respect. It is very important to earn their confidence. Elders are the key to successful negotiations. Talking to just one individual or to small groups is not usually appropriate protocol.
- Discussions should be open, honest and generous with no hidden agendas.
- Establish communication prior to starting a project to ensure inclusion and participation. Involve the community in genuine negotiation and / or consultation at every phase of a project.
- Arrange a comfortable and flexible environment for listening and talking. Be flexible, get out of the office, sit down and talk out in the open, on the riverbank or under the trees. Conversations need to be open to opportunity.
- Be sensitive to issues of language, naming and expression. Examine assumptions carefully. Listen, ask and then listen carefully to the reply.
- Know about proper times to consult and be aware of inappropriate times such as cultural events or other community activities.
- Keep participants fully informed. In all negotiation and consultative processes the feedback loop is important.

### **TIME: building long-term, honest and useful relationships takes time**

- Allocate time for proper consultation, for 'sit-down-and-talk' time and space for consideration and reflection. Listen, and be comfortable with silence.
- Organise flexible time-lines for project management. Allow enough time to create open channels for communication and networking.
- Set aside time for the community to hold their own discussions. Respect their decision-making process.
- Make time for humour, relaxing, informal socialising and sharing a meal.

### **ATTITUDES: Agencies and interpreters should acknowledge Aboriginal control, direction, knowledge and skills**

- Understand that many Aboriginal communities are deeply connected to country, and the relationship with country is spiritual, fundamental and enduring.
- Learn how to listen: listening can be more important than talking.
- Build awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, culturally appropriate processes and contemporary issues. Each individual or agency must do their homework, know the legal, environmental, social and cultural scene. Each community has its own protocols and guidelines, within the general framework. Always ask, do not make assumptions. Learn from Aboriginal communities about their special cultural sites, work with Aboriginal communities, and employ Aboriginal people.
- Be sensitive to separate women's and men's issues.

- Be aware of family and community cohesion, be informed about local politics and possible divisions within a community.
- Get involved with Aboriginal organisations and events, where appropriate.
- Be willing to change or even start afresh. Avoid bureaucracy and rigid bureaucratic responses. Avoid paternalism and preaching.
- Have clear aims, objectives and expectations and negotiate openly and in good faith with no hidden agendas.

## **Interpretive Practice**

### **The spoken word: face to face interpretation**

The ideal practice for interpreting Indigenous culture is face-to-face with local Indigenous guides. It is a culturally appropriate “oral way of learning” from an Aboriginal perspective. For the audience, it offers a two-way flow of communication and an experience that is closer to actively sharing and participating than a more passive or linear form of absorption.

The politics of interpreting culture is a sensitive issue. The control of information is a key factor. A range of issues, including gender, age and authority, directs the protocol for who can speak in a particular place on particular subjects. Agencies and audiences need to understand that there may be certain cultural issues that are not for public consumption, they are not for open discussion or sharing. Self-representation for Indigenous communities is essential.

### **Connection to Country / Authority to share knowledge**

The context of the presenter / guide / interpreter is a key factor. Under whose authority do they have permission to discuss this culture and this country? Is the interpreter a traditional custodian, an Aboriginal Australian from another area, or a non-Aboriginal person? As a matter of course this issue of authority should be made known very early in the session, preferably right at the beginning because it will clarify the matter of authority. Explain the key questions. Who am I? Where am I from? Who were my ancestors? Why I am here today?

### **Continuity: Traditional Knowledge, Contact History and Contemporary Culture**

Interpret in a way that expresses the continuity and connectedness of culture and country. Country is a central idea in terms of representing culture as a dynamic force. Culture is not a museum artefact. Culture is not static; it changes. Culture is creative and dynamic. It should be discussed in inclusive terms rather than representing isolated images of the past. Culture is based on the continuity of past and present, but also has expectations for the future.

### **Welcome to Country**

Aboriginal people practice the courtesy of welcoming strangers to their country. If they are not able to do this in person, the interpreter not from that country should ask the community how they would like it done. At the very least there is a need to acknowledge the people of that country, and pay respect to the elders ie *I respectfully acknowledge the elders and community of this country ... or ... We thank them for welcoming us to their land ...* where possible use traditional names for people and country.

### **The written word: publications, signs and displays**

- Develop proposals jointly with community from the beginning. Seek out protocols regarding written and visual resources.
- Observe intellectual property rights. Safeguard copyright of stories and images.
- The content of all copy and text and selection of images is subject to community consultation, advice and approval. Artwork should be commissioned from Aboriginal people, who retain copyright.

- Language must be accurate, based on research, and culturally sensitive. Ensure Aboriginal custodianship and culture is referred to in the present tense, unless the community wants it otherwise. Develop a glossary of words to be avoided.
- *'We are still here!'* Use the present tense when discussing people and country.
- The whole design process is subject to community approval: lay out, colour, use of symbols and images. Ensure correct use of symbols, motifs and logos.
- Consider using Aboriginal names as the norm, with colonial names as secondary. However, there are a variety of local names for rivers and ranges.
- All signage located in natural and cultural sites should acknowledge the local Aboriginal people in accordance with their wishes. This should involve policies developed across agencies and ideally across the whole of Government.

## **Designing Interpretive Media**

Various forms of interpretive media allow flexible, creative opportunities for Aboriginal people to be visible in modern culture. Aboriginal people should not only direct the representation of their culture, but also collaborate on the design and production of brochures, fact sheets, fliers, booklets, educational materials, websites, park notes, videos, photographs, motifs, clothing, advertisements, oral recordings and music.

Aboriginal country should be acknowledged in all publications, including tourism information, publicity, promotions, marketing, and invitations for community education and participation.

## **Funding and Employment**

There are important opportunities for the training and employment of Aboriginal people through the development of Aboriginal cultural heritage interpretation projects.

Agencies and interpreters should clearly identify to communities their goals and objectives. At the same time, agencies and interpreters must ask communities what they want.

- Budget adequately for time and space in developing a project. Create a culture willing to share skills and knowledge with Aboriginal people and staff.
- Allocate adequate funding for resources and travel for all participants.
- Select the right person for the job through appropriate procedures and protocols. Exercise flexibility in employment criteria, where appropriate.
- Develop positions in agencies specifically for Aboriginal people.
- Be genuinely committed to negotiated outcomes. Think about the integrated story and avoid marginalizing the Indigenous presence.
- Recognise the need for Aboriginal employees to learn skills associated with the whole process of interpretive design and development. Jobs should be created for Aboriginal people within the development of an Aboriginal interpretive project. Too many consultative processes contribute very little to communities or individuals.
- Establish culturally appropriate work agreements and payment arrangements. Avoid the assumption of volunteerism.
- Organise language interpreters for people whose first language is other than English.
- Employ Indigenous people throughout organisations, not just for work identified as 'Indigenous'.

## **Commercial Tour Operators**

Private tourism businesses usually operate on public land such as national parks. Some of these may be leased back by the traditional owners; others may be negotiating co-management arrangements. All of them are likely to be sites of continuing cultural significance for the local community. Agencies and businesses should discuss with communities issues of management such as certification and education in cross-cultural awareness.

Commercial operators should not interpret Aboriginal culture without written permission from the local community.

- Only people approved by a local Indigenous community can interpret local Aboriginal culture, sites and objects.
- Tourism operators have an obligation to approach Aboriginal people, community and heritage sites with respect.
- Tourism operators should acknowledge the traditional custodians of that country.
- Tourism operators should employ Aboriginal people when conducting Aboriginal interpretation, and they should be paid appropriately.
- The intellectual and cultural property of Indigenous peoples must be respected and acknowledged appropriately.
- Tourism operators should aim to have all staff trained in cross-cultural awareness given by appropriate Aboriginal people.
- Tourism operators should discuss the interpretation of contact history with the local community.

## **Contemporary Political and Social Context**

Consider context. Consider the different perspectives 'of the day' as well as 'of today'. Allow for differences in cultural sensitivities over a range of issues. Every community has its own protocols and sensitivities.

First and foremost, when on country, discuss stories and issues with the local community and understand what they want to say. All interpreters should make it their business to know about and reflect on the history of contact, conflict and cooperation, right up to the present day. Approach contested issues with respect and sensitivity.

## Resources and Further Reading

Interpreters should read as much as possible, especially books written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as Margaret Tucker, Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Evelyn Crawford, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Iris Lovett Gardiner, Banjo Clarke, Robyn Morgan and Alexis Wright. There are many new young writers, poets, artists and filmmakers.

**Films** include *The Tracker*, *Ten Canoes*, and *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

### Other useful resources include:

AHC 2002 *Ask First: A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra.

Broad introduction to the management of Indigenous heritage places. Interpretation is described as 'actions that may help change people's behaviour'. Available online from the AHC [www.ahc.gov.au/publications/index.html](http://www.ahc.gov.au/publications/index.html)

Walsh, Fiona and Paul Mitchell, eds. 2002, *Planning for Country: Cross-cultural approaches to decision-making on Aboriginal lands*, Jukurrpa books, Alice Springs.

Participatory planning for land management in remote communities. Valuable insights into the complexities of participatory planning, with many illustrative examples.

Kleinert, Sylvia and Neale, Margo, eds. 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press.

Important reference book and rich source of information, analysis and interpretation.

Rose, Deborah Bird 1996, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra.

Thoughtful exploration by a widely respected anthropologist who has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities. Available online from the AHC. [www.ahc.gov.au/publications/index.html](http://www.ahc.gov.au/publications/index.html)

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au)

**ABC Indigenous Affairs** section runs an impressive website called Message Stick. It summaries all Indigenous broadcasting, with transcripts and downloads available. The Cultural Protocol section is very thorough. Check out MessageClub, for children. [www.abc.net.au/message/](http://www.abc.net.au/message/).

**Welcome to Country.** Almost all cultural organisations, public agencies and government bodies have policies to acknowledge traditional owners and encourage Welcome to Country messages from Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. Australia is a country of many 'countries'. These welcomes emphasize Relationship, Responsibility and Respect [www.aboriginaltourism.com.au](http://www.aboriginaltourism.com.au)