

# First Nations Collecting Strategy



Version: 1.0

Approved by: Executive

Policy owner/sponsor: State Librarian

Policy Contact Officer: Damien Webb / Brendan Somes

Policy location: [First Nations Collecting Strategy](#)

Date: 1/03/2023

Next review: 1/03/2025

Australia is home to some of the oldest continuing cultures in the world and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples and traditional custodians of the lands, skies and waters of this country. Across these First Nations there is a great diversity of cultural practices and languages, including nations with distinct histories, protocols and dialects.

The State Library of New South Wales collects and preserves material to illuminate who we are, where we are from and where we might be going. The Library's Collection Development Policy commits the Library to ensuring that First Nations people(s) can see their histories, languages and culture represented in the Library's collection.

This Collecting Strategy, following on from the Library's initial Indigenous Collecting Strategy released in 2015, outlines the collecting areas and key priorities for the Library over the next four years to document, articulate and celebrate First Nations peoples, communities, politics and cultures in New South Wales and Australia. The Strategy supports the Library's broader goals of diversifying its historically narrow collecting focus and increasing meaningful collaboration with First Nations peoples and communities.

## I. Principles

The Collecting Strategy operates within the Library's Collection Development Policy and is informed by three principles.

### **The role of the Library**

Libraries are not neutral. Libraries actively seek material from a variety of perspectives – the Library's Collection Development Policy clearly states that: the collection covers a wide range of subjects and incorporates a plurality of voices and perspectives. It will continue to do so. It is acknowledged that the Library itself and its practices of acquiring, describing, storing, and making accessible its collections are based upon legacy practices and traditional modes of thinking, and these have been predominantly informed by Western understanding of knowledge, memory and legacy.

For First Nations peoples, libraries may not be considered safe or trusted keeping places; and libraries may be viewed as inflexible or inappropriate for storing complex cultural knowledge. First Nations cultures often rely on very different modes of storing, sharing and keeping their knowledge, which can be compromised by current library practices and hierarchies. While the Library aims to better represent First Nations peoples and literacies, it recognises that there

may be limitations which require us to instead support local communities to manage their own collections (especially secret/sacred/sensitive material).

### **Respecting First Nations forms of knowledge and memory**

People over time have recorded their lives, histories, environments, beliefs, communities and cultures in a variety of forms. The First Nations people of New South Wales and Australia utilised vast networks of knowledge which was expressed and shared through oral traditions (songs, language, stories), complex symbols and representations (songlines, carvings, painting and maps), and interconnected systems of law, lore, ecology, science and kinship.

The Library's Collection Development Policy recognises this variety of forms with a key collecting principle being that the Library collects the format closest to the original on the understanding that this best represents the content and the intention of the creator. For First Nations material, this means collecting material that may not fit with the traditional Western forms of recording experience. For example, where a traditional Western policy may define paintings as simply visual representations of a subject, in a First Nations context a 'painting' may embody a map, family tree, generational cultural knowledge, personal history/memory, or a combination of all of these elements. Library definitions of formats and their related value or relevance must be reassessed in collaboration with First Nations staff and communities to ensure our future collecting is informed by First Nations advice, and categories are expanded as appropriate.

### **Historical Collections**

The historical collections of the Library overwhelmingly reflect western views and are largely limited to material which is about First Nations peoples and culture, rather than material by or for First Nations Communities and individuals. The library sector recognises that the practice of collecting these histories has historically been biased towards colonial heritage and the legacies of figures associated with settler-colonist narratives and achievements<sup>1</sup>. The Library recognises that the portrayal of First Nations peoples and cultures within these collections has often been racist, incorrect, and uninformed by First Nations knowledge holders and Elders.

While work is ongoing to understand the Library's historical collections it is vital that we ensure new acquisitions do not recreate the same issues. The Library commits to ensuring that First Nations staff and Communities are involved in identifying and assessing potential acquisitions (including colonial and historical collections) which contain Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural knowledge, which will be supported by an ICIP framework and principles. This focus on informed and strategic contemporary First Nations collecting is vital to ensuring that library collections are reflective of the diversity of First Nations communities and peoples.

## **2. The First Nations Peoples of Australia and New South Wales**

The First Nations Peoples of Australia are not a single homogenous cultural group, instead representing hundreds of unique language groups and kinship clans. These different groups may share language or culture but often have different (and even competing) histories, interests, priorities and politics. Within what is now called NSW there are at least 35 distinct language groups each with numerous dialects, and many remain closely connected to their ancestral lands, waters and skies. It is imperative that staff at the Library ensure the collections reflect

---

<sup>1</sup> [Position statement: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections and services in NSLA libraries - National and State Libraries Australasia](#)

this diversity and understand that many groups are invested in ongoing journeys to achieve land sovereignty, language revitalisation and cultural authority.

It is important to remember that First Nations peoples represent 3.4% of the NSW population, and one third of the First Nations population of Australia. This population is much younger than non-Aboriginal populations with more than half of all First Nations people being aged under 24 years. More than 80% of First Nations people now live in an urban or inner regional area. A further 15% of First Nations people live in outer regional areas while less than 4% currently live in outer regional or remote areas.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Collecting Priorities**

The First Nations Collecting Priorities, informed by the Library's Collection Development Policy and the three key principles above, identify key areas where the Library will actively work with First Nations peoples and communities. The collecting priorities are:

#### **First Nations created material that documents lives, communities and environments of First Nations peoples.**

As with the 2015 Collecting Strategy, a key priority is the collecting of material created by First Nations peoples. This means prioritising the collection of works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and creators, rather than works which are merely about them.

#### **Historical and colonial heritage collections which represent First Nations lives, communities and Country**

While the collecting of colonial and historical material which includes accounts, descriptions and representations of First Nations peoples can be problematic, these sources (along with oral histories) are often important surviving accounts from specific areas or eras. Understanding the impacts and legacies of colonisation remains important for many First Nations peoples, and these sources can often highlight uncomfortable or misunderstood truths. This type of material should be collected with advice from First Nations peoples.

#### **First Nations Languages**

There are dozens of active Aboriginal language and culture centres in NSW producing language resources including children's books, dictionaries and wordlists. These organisations are often missed when claiming Legal Deposit resources. In many instances the material they publish is created in limited runs. The primary aim should be to collect and preserve the material as part of the publishing history of NSW and First Nations peoples. The secondary aim should be to provide information about Legal Deposit legislation.

#### **First Nations understandings of Country, cultures and histories**

The Library will prioritise works which represent/document First Nations understandings of Country, culture and history but which may be in formats that typically wouldn't be prioritised (potentially including artworks, carvings, objects, tools and podcasts).

#### **First Nations Political and Rights Movements**

The Library will continue to collect and prioritise First Nations political and rights movements including key ongoing issues such as land rights, deaths in custody, equality and sovereignty. The Library will commission First Nations people to document these movements.

## **Elders' Experiences and Knowledge**

For many First Nations peoples Elders represent living libraries of knowledge, culture, language and history. The Library will work to the principal of respectful urgency to collect voices of authority and to support communities to record the knowledge and stories of their Elders.

## **Regional and Remote First Nations Representation**

While the majority of First Nations people in NSW live in urban and inner-regional areas nearly 20 percent live, work and remain on lands which are classified as outer-regional and remote. The Library will prioritise the acquisition or commission of collections which represent these areas and the experiences of First Nations peoples outside of major towns and cities.

## **Prominent First Nations Individuals and Organisations**

The Library will actively prioritise the works of prominent First Nations people including artists/creators, Elders, performers, innovators, scientists, politicians and others.

The priorities outlined above are not ordered in importance, and priority will be given to critical and time-sensitive collecting which will often include emerging political issues and the stories and collections of Elders whose life expectancy remains on average 10 years lower than non-Indigenous people. Current priorities in First Nations communities include stolen generation survivor stories, creative arts, political and equality activism, and language/culture revitalisation.

These collecting priorities will be complemented by the Library's collecting of New South Wales, Australian and relevant international publications – and with consideration for the roles of other collecting organisations.

## **4. Governance**

The First Nations Collecting Strategy is aligned to the Library's Collection Development Policy, it's implementation is the responsibility of the Library and Information Services Division in partnership with the Indigenous Engagement Branch of the Mitchell Library Division and supported by the First Nations Advisory Board.