

The Living Archive of Aboriginal Collections

A framework for co-production of Museums Victoria's digital Living Archive of Indigenous Collections

The Living Archive of Aboriginal Collections provided a context and framework to test a digital Community Access Portal (CAP) linked with Museums Victoria's collections. A collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Museums Victoria, the project employed a collaborative community-based approach engaging with the Ngukurr Community in southeast Arnhem Land.

The notion of a 'living archive' is a move towards acknowledging the networked, interconnected nature of Indigenous knowledge in archival and collection systems, traditionally static sites of preservation. Alongside work on the return of cultural heritage and data sovereignty, the 'living archive' is a valuable lens through which museum collection data structures and systems can be reformed and re-envisioned. By linking and enriching established catalogue information with contemporary representations of lived culture, a 'living archive' supports Indigenous communities to control their data and direct the narratives that surround this material.

Project Timeline

Identifying items

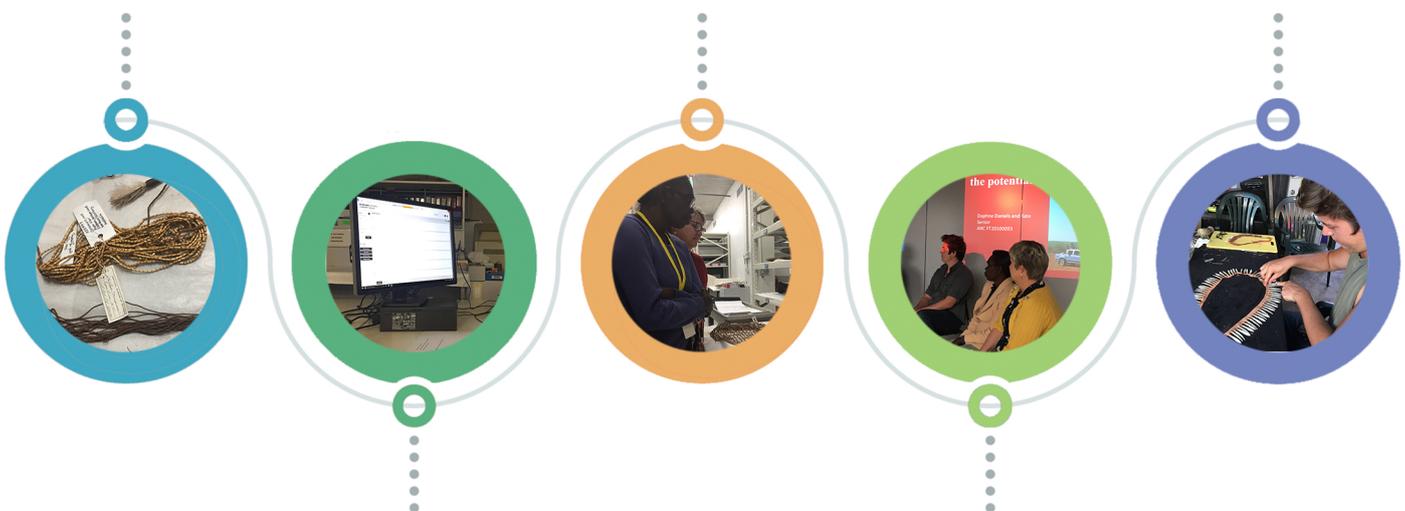
The first stage of the project involved searching the Museum's collection management system EMU for material connected to Ngukurr. 161 records were identified. The extent of Museums Victoria's Arnhem Land collection means more expansive searches are a possibility.

Visiting the collection

In October 2019 Daphne Daniels, Ngukurr News Editor, travelled from Ngukurr to Melbourne to view this material and to choose a selection of objects and photographs. From the 161 records, 20 objects and 20 photographs were uploaded to the CAP. Other objects were outside Daphne's expertise, and require ongoing consultations with senior people in the community

Ongoing work

1. (MV): Development on the CAP and associated digital infrastructure is ongoing, including fulfilling security and access requirements necessary to make the portal available to the Ngukurr community.
2. (UoM): Future plans for sharing knowledge about the revivifying of material culture between Ngukurr and Aboriginal communities in Victoria are part of an ARC funded Discovery Grant *Indigenous Storytelling and the Living Archive of Aboriginal Knowledge*



Refining the CAP

Through discussions within the project team across Museums Victoria, the University of Melbourne and project data advisors the Community Access Portal (CAP) interface was refined to suit the requirements of the Ngukurr community.

Public Conversation

To engage with the Indigenous participants and project partners, the Digital Studio in the Faculty of Arts hosted a public conversation. This event discussed museum collections and the newspaper as sites for preserving, archiving and revivifying aspects of Ngukurr material culture.

A photograph of Neighbour

One of the most remarkable photographs chosen by Daphne is the image and story of 'Neighbour' (known as Ayaiga in Ngukurr). Arrested for robbery in 1911 while being transported in iron chains by officer WF Johns, drama struck as they crossed the flooding Wilton River. The horse floundered, Johns' fell and was swept up in the rising water. Neighbour swam to the officer's rescue, saving him from drowning. Hailed a hero Neighbour was awarded the Albert medal for bravery.

Local Ngukurr artist, Wally Wilfred has been keeping Neighbour/Ayaiga's story alive through his contemporary wooden sculptures, posted on the Ngukurr Arts Centre Instagram. The museum photograph of Neighbour is soon to be circulated in the community, illustrating the ongoing connections between history and stories in Ngukurr.



Ayaiga (Neighbour), winner of the Albert Medal, Roper River, Eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, 1912. Photographer: W. B. Spencer. Source: Museums Victoria

Project Outcomes

Accessing and linking knowledge

This project provided a context and framework to test Museums Victoria's Community Access Portal (CAP).

Information on the CAP can be controlled by community. Knowledge can be visible just to an individual, shared only within community, or via a dynamic connection into Museums Victoria's collection systems, allowing sharing directly with curators and the wider public, when and if the community chooses.

Conceived as a platform for access, through this project the CAP is now envisioned as a site for creating new knowledge by linking historic material with contemporary culture.

Indigenous research collaboration

This project has been guided by a request from the Ngukurr Community to find and access more of their cultural heritage.

Fostering conversations and collaborations with the Ngukurr Community has helped to refine and further develop the functionality of CAP.

The digital innovations supported by this project have been enabled through in-person encounters and direct engagement with collections, reinforcing the importance of working across both digital and physical domains.

Daphne Daniels has positioned the Ngukurr News as a site for publishing material about Museums Victoria collections, and sharing knowledge accessed through the CAP more widely across the community.

Knowledge as 'Living Archive'

"We need these kinds of [living] archives to hold information, because it will be up to my generation in 20, 30 years to pass this knowledge down. And if we don't get information from our Elders now, we could be looking at another serious gap in knowledge"
– Mitch Mahoney, Boonwurrung artist

Drawing on research from the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art, this project has worked to further challenge the idea of what archival and collections systems can be, by incorporating contemporary Indigenous perspectives.

The project has established connections between communities in Ngukurr and Victoria to share experiences and practice for the revivifying of material culture.

Project Team

Indigenous Researchers

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