



FIRST NATIONS MEDIA ARCHIVES

Significance and Preservation Needs Assessment Overview

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

In the management of First Nations media archives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and Law are the guiding principles.

Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are essential cultural authorities at the centre of all decision making associated with management of the archives.

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1. Introduction

Significance Statements are important for local communities. They engender a sense of pride in the work of First Nations media organisations as well as help Archives sort through preservation priorities. Significance Statements are independently assessed by qualified assessors. This places First Nation media archives in a good position to seek funding support.

Preservation Needs Assessments are important for gaining independent and expert advice on storage, accommodation and media preservation challenges. Such assessments can be used for planning as well as for targeted funding applications.

In summary the role of these two documents can be expressed as:

- Verifying that the Archive is not only of local significance but is of importance at State/Territory and /or national levels – the **Significance Statement**.
- Evidencing that an Archive, verified as being of State/Territory and/or national significance, needs preservation support and funding – the **Preservation Needs Assessment**.

The most common approach for Archives is to have a Significance study undertaken first, followed by a Preservation Needs Assessment.

2. Funding of Significance Statements and Preservation Needs Assessments

Funding is available for Significance Statements and Preservation Needs Assessment through the Community Heritage Grants of the National Library of Australia. More information is provided at <https://www.nla.gov.au/awards-and-grants/chg>.

Maximum funding through the Community Heritage grants are:

- Significance Statement - \$4,500 ex GST
- Preservation Needs Assessment - \$5,000 ex GST

3. Definitions

3.1 Significance

Definition:

Significance defines the meanings and values of a cultural heritage item or collection through research and analysis, and by assessment against a standard set of criteria. In relation to tangible heritage it refers to the values and meanings that items and collections have for people and communities. Significance comprises four main values:

- Aesthetic
- Historic
- Scientific
- Social

Other values, such as Spiritual, may however emerge through a Significance Study.

Explanatory notes:

Significance is a professional concept. It is derived from the work of international cultural bodies that assists monuments, sites and tangible heritage to be assessed against an internationally agreed set of guidelines and criteria.

In Australia, the application of the international guidelines for Significance are set by the Australian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Australia ICOMOS). The Australia ICOMOS adopted cultural significance guidelines in April 1984, with a revision four years later. The full guidelines can be found at <https://marquis-kyle.com.au/bcsignificance.htm#1.4>.

The Significance 2.0 publication of the Collections Council of Australia also provides useful information about significance. It can be downloaded from <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1761/f/significance-2.0.pdf>

3.2 Statement of Significance

From *Significance 2.0*

Definition

“A statement of significance is a reasoned, readable summary of the values, meaning and importance of an item or collection. The length and level of detail will depend on the item or collection, the circumstances in which the assessment is carried out, and the available time, skills and resources.”

Explanatory notes:

“A statement of significance summarises the information and research assembled by following the step-by-step assessment method, looking at how [a collection] compares with similar items, and considering the relevant criteria. It is effectively an argument about the meaning of an item or collection and how and why it is significant. The case made in the statement of significance can be justified by referring back to the research and analysis laid out in the step-by-step process.

A statement of significance is a reference point for all the policies, actions and decisions about how the item is managed. It is a means of sharing knowledge about why an item is important, and why it has a place in a public collection.

A statement of significance is a concise summary of the values, meaning and importance of an item or collection. It is an argument about how and why an item or collection is of value”.

3.3 Preservation Needs Assessment

Definition:

A Preservation Needs Assessment is a study of the physical condition of a collection, the suitability of current housing and storage facilities and a set of recommendations for the development of a conservation program, including disaster management.

Explanatory Notes:

The principal objective of a Preservation Needs Assessment is to assist an Archive to:

- Assess its environmental needs.
- Identify and prioritise problem situations.
- Establish appropriate maintenance and management regimes.
- Implement sustainable and appropriate solutions, where necessary.

The Preservation Needs Assessment is a wholistic review of the Archive. It doesn't simply look at the media and its storage but also looks at a wide range of environmental conditions, access and usage risks, building and room design, archive room fit out, vermin control, and disaster management.

4. Significance

First Nations media archives are most likely to have significance relevant to aesthetic, historic and social significance values. However, a significance assessor will assess other values, with scientific significance also possible in areas such as linguistic research.

4.1 Types of Significance

4.1.1 Aesthetic value

Aesthetic value is related to the sensory perceptions associated with an Archive. This can be interpreted as the aesthetic value of media itself in the collection as judged by the non-tangible responses people have to the media. This is **not** of relevance where the media held in the Archive is **not** produced by the Archive's "owning" media organisation.

However, it is likely that First Nations community media archives are formed by the productions of the Archive's own organisation. The collection may therefore:

- Represent a particular aesthetic of production significant for the relevant First Nations language and culture group, and/or
- Production style of the media organisation.

A collection that includes artefacts or artistic works may also have aesthetic significance.

4.1.2 Historic value

Historic values are related to the way in which an Archive might be influenced or have been influenced by, an historic figure, event, phase or activity.

An Archive might also have historic value as the site of an important event. For any given place the significance will be greater where evidence of the association or event survives in situ.

Many First Nations media Archives are associated with significant people associated with the development of First Nations owned community media, or are associated with the history of First Nations community media.

4.1.3 Social value

Social values encompass the qualities an Archive has as a focus for spiritual, political, or cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group.

“Social or spiritual significance is always specific to a particular, identified group of people. This type of significance only applies to items and collections where there is a demonstrated contemporary attachment between the item or collection and a group or community.”¹

¹ Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections. Roslyn Russell, Kylie Winkworth. 2nd ed. Adelaide, Collections Council of Australia. Adelaide. 2009. p39.

4.1.4 Scientific value

The scientific or research value of an Archive will depend upon the importance of the media held in the Archive for its:

- Rarity; and/or
- Quality; and/or
- Representativeness; and/or
- The degree to which the Archive may contribute further substantial information.

In other words the assessment will consider whether the Collection has research value or potential or if the Collection itself is of interest to researchers.

This type of significance only applies to Archives of current research value, or with research potential.²

4.2 Steps in a Significance study

The Community Heritage Grants website sets out the steps for a Significance Assessment at <https://www.nla.gov.au/chg/significance-assessments>. A summary follows here:

1. **Find an assessor.** Assessors need to be appropriately qualified persons. They cannot be a member of the Archive's staff. Typically ,assessors are qualified historians, but may also be consultants/curators to museums and galleries. The Community Heritage grants page provides links to organisations that can help find an assessor.
2. **Get a quote from potential assessors.** Assume 2 days on site plus travel and another 4-5 days for research and writing the report. Community Heritage Grants provide a maximum of \$4,500 ex GST for Significance Assessments.
3. **Prepare for the assessment.** Consult with the Archive staff, relevant cultural custodians and community members to let them know about the Significance

² Ibid. p39.

statement - the Significance Assessor will want to talk with them. Clearly define the Archive for the Assessor. Some questions to get you started:

- a. What is the Archive's history?
- b. Who "owns" it? What is the history of that organisation; who has been involved with it, how does the organisation fit into the history of First Nations media?
- c. What type of media is held in the Archive?
- d. What is the ICIP and copyright of the Archive media?
- e. What is represented in the Archive's media collection: culture and language content, and, social and community histories? Other?
- f. Who accesses the Archive and on what basis?
- g. The location of the Archive – does that have importance or significance?
- h. Does the "owning" organisation's media held in the Archive have specific production values?

4. Be aware of what the Significance Statement will contain. This can help you with preparing for the assessment as well. The completed Statement will contain:

- a. Description of the process and methodology
- b. Summary of the Archive's organisation and of the Archive
- c. History and significance if the Archive and it's organisation
- d. Key recommendations. For example, the need for a preservation needs assessment, training need, collection management needs, etc,
- e. Detailed assessment of the significance of the Archive with supporting evidence.

5. Preservation Needs Assessment

As noted above a Preservation Needs Assessment will identify:

- What media formats your Archive stores
- What risks the Archive is exposed to
- What Archive care practices are in place or need to be in place
- What are the priorities

As for the Significance Statement, a Preservation Needs Assessment needs to be carried out by a qualified person.

5.1 Steps in a Preservation Needs Assessment

The Community Heritage grants website sets out the steps for a Preservation Needs Assessment at <https://www.nla.gov.au/chg/preservation-needs-assessments>. A summary follows here:

1. **Find an assessor.** This person needs to be a qualified conservator. The webpage above sets out places to source such a person.
2. **Get a quote from potential assessors.** Assume 2 days on site plus travel and another 4-5 days for research and writing the report. The Community Heritage Grant scheme will only fund to a maximum of \$4,500 ex GST for a Preservation Needs Assessment.
3. **Prepare for the assessment.** The Significance Statement will be an important document to provide to the Assessor. Again, you'll need to clearly define the Archive for the Preservation Needs Assessor. Here are some questions to get you started:
 - a. What is the Archive's history?
 - b. Who "owns" it? What is the history of that organisation?
 - c. What type of media is held in the Archive?
 - d. What is the ICIP and copyright of the Archive media?
 - e. Have you got a catalogue that the Assessor can access?
 - f. What collection access and management plans and policies have you already got in place?
 - g. What collection preservation practices have you already got in place:
 - i. Proper shelf order system?
 - ii. Effective cataloguing /digital asset management system?
 - iii. Digitisation priorities plan and digitisation program?
 - iv. Temperature and humidity control measures?
 - v. Vermin control measures?

vi. Cleaning measures?

4. Be aware of what the Preservation Needs Assessment report will contain.

This can help you with preparing for the assessment as well. The completed Statement will contain:

- a. Key recommendations and priorities
- b. Detailed assessment of preservation provisions:
 - i. Policies
 - ii. Collection description and condition
 - iii. Building needs
 - iv. Environmental issues
 - v. Storage needs
 - vi. Housekeeping
 - vii. User impact
 - viii. Disaster preparedness