

# National Reconciliation Week

## Overview of First Nations Cultural Heritage

During National Reconciliation Week every year from 27 May to 3 June, it is timely to consider the Kurna, Peramangk, Nukunu, Narungga and Ngadjuri Nations we engage and work with across the Northern and Yorke region. We can consider and appreciate the cultural heritage that exists and better understand how it shapes these communities and informs their connection to Country.

First Nations Cultural Heritage refers to the rich and diverse traditions, histories, practices, and knowledge systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are the original custodians of the land we now call Australia. With thousands of years of continuous connection to the land, sea, and sky, First Nations cultures represent the oldest living cultures in the world.

### Identity ... What is “Country”

Australia’s First Nations peoples comprise hundreds of distinct nations or language groups, each with unique cultural expressions, languages, laws, and spiritual beliefs. We often hear the phrase “Country” and the inherent deep spiritual connection to Country. It is an all-encompassing term that includes land, water, skies, flora, fauna, and ancestral beings. Cultural heritage is inherently tied to Country and is passed down through generations via oral storytelling, song, dance, art (traditional and modern), ceremony, and wider traditional practices.

### Tangible and Intangible Heritage

First Nations cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements:

**Tangible heritage:** Rock art sites (some as close as the hills behind the Gawler office), tools, sacred sites, burial grounds, and artefacts.

**Intangible heritage:** Oral histories, languages, traditional knowledge, dance, initiation ceremonies, Dreaming stories, kinship systems, and spiritual practices.



Fish traps around the coast are tangible evidence of cultural heritage

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### Dreaming and Lore

Central to First Nations narration is the concept of the Dreaming, which refers to the ancestral time when the world was formed. It shapes lore, customs, and relationships with the environment and is reflected in cultural expressions and land management practices.

Traditional, Dreaming should guide moral and social codes, and it is foundational to identity and cultural continuity. As with all societies, this is becoming increasingly more difficult to retain.

### Contemporary Challenges and Resilience

First Nations cultural heritage has endured significant challenges due to colonisation, dispossession, forced assimilation, and destruction of sacred sites. Policies such as the Stolen Generations and the suppression of Indigenous languages have contributed to cultural loss. Despite these impacts, First Nations peoples have shown remarkable resilience and continue to practice and revitalise their cultural traditions.

Efforts are being made nationally, to protect and promote First Nations heritage through:

- Cultural heritage laws and protections (though many argue these remain insufficient),
- Land rights and Native Title claims,
- Language programs,
- Indigenous education and arts initiatives,
- Cultural tourism and
- Partnerships in land and sea management (e.g., Indigenous Protected Areas and ranger programs).

### How do we at the Northern and Yorke Landscape Board help to protect Cultural Heritage?

The NYLB [Aboriginal Engagement Strategy 2020](#). Outlines our Goals, Strategies, Activities and Measures to provide strategic leadership for the management of natural resources in the Northern and Yorke region. This ensures that First Nation community views, priorities, values are recognised and considered in our operations.

The [LandscapeSA Boards Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Statement Of Commitment.pdf](#) provides a commitment for all Landscape SA Boards to implementing actions that will partner with First Nations communities to manage, protect and restore Country. This is undertaken in line with the State and Federal targets including Closing the Gap and Reconciliation principles.

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Some examples of the practical application of the above mandates can be seen in our:

- Acknowledgement of Country before events
- Support of the Five Nations Landscape Committee and associated projects
- Funding of Healthy Country Plans
- Encouraging input of First Nations communities in Water Allocation Planning
- Providing direct engagement in Stronger Country project activities
- Supporting Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) across our region

## Sites of Cultural Significance

Identifying whether an area has First Nations cultural significance in South Australia involves consulting with the Traditional Custodians and relevant communities, through the South Australian Native Title Services or local Aboriginal Land Councils. These groups hold deep knowledge of the land, including sacred sites, song lines, and historical connections.

Additionally, the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988 (SA) provides legal protection for sites of significance and outlines processes for assessment and registration. Engaging respectfully and early with First Nations people is essential to ensure cultural heritage is properly recognised and preserved.

The Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988 requires maintenance of three registers:

- Register of Recognised Aboriginal Representative Bodies (RARBs)
- Register of Aboriginal Sites and Objects, part of the Central Archive.
- Register of Agreements

To review: [SA Cultural Heritage Database and Register](#)

- For more information refer : [Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988](#)

## Conclusion

Australian First Nations Cultural Heritage is a vital and enduring part of our national identity, offering profound insights into sustainability, spirituality, and interconnectedness with the natural world. Recognising, respecting, and safeguarding this heritage is not only a matter of law but also essential to the broader understanding of Australia's past, present, and future.

### More information

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