

Indigenous Archives Network Western Australia (IANWA)

Western Australia's 2029 Bicentenary

A Statement from the Indigenous Archives Network of Western Australia (IANWA)

IANWA calls on the Western Australian Government to make equitable access to Aboriginal family records a defining and enduring legacy of the 2029 Bicentenary.

The 2029 Bicentenary of the founding of the Swan River Colony marks 200 years of colonisation in the Western part of the Australian continent. Originally impacting Whadjuk Nyungar Boodjar communities, colonisation expanded from 1829, devastating Aboriginal families' kinship systems, languages and cultural practices statewide that had ensured the expert care of diverse communities and vital ecosystems for more than 6500 generations. The Bicentenary is an integral moment to recognise more than 65,000 years of deep-time human history and to reflect on the consequences of colonisation, including the immense harm caused to Aboriginal families and to the state's ecosystems, which prior to colonisation, were so lovingly curated and nurtured.

IANWA is a network of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members, researchers and archive-sector workers committed to Indigenous data sovereignty, self-determination, social justice and culturally safe Indigenous archives. IANWA's diverse membership includes representation from the following Western Australian Clans/Nations/Language Groups: Noongar, Menang, Ballardong, Yued, Kaneang, Wagyl Kaip, Koreng/Goreng, Yamatji, Wajarri/Wudjari, Badimia, Amangu, Goreng, Wudjari, Palyku, Bunuba, Jaru, Gija/Kija, Yurriyangem, Koongie, Nimanburr, Walitjari, Ngykina, Ngarrawanji, Nyikina, Yawuru, Djugun/Djukun, Yingarrda, Bard/Bardi, Nyul Nyul, Jabirr Jabirr, Martu, Badimia, Pinikura, Pinikuwarra, Kuwarra, Kurrama, Malarngowem, Ngadju, Mirning, Yindjibarndi.

Our membership also has affiliations with the following organisations and institutions: Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation; Berndt Museum (UWA); Carrolup Centre for Truthtelling (Curtin University); Digitisation Centre of WA (UWA); Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa Aboriginal Corporation; Kimberley Language Resource Centre; LinkUp Australia; Monash University; National Archives of Australia; Ngadju Native Title Aboriginal Corporation; Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Aboriginal Corporation; South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council; State Library of WA; the Healing Foundation; UWA Archives; UWA Centre for Indigenous Studies; Aboriginal Languages WA; WA Museum; WA Police Museum and Archives; Yinhawangka Aboriginal Corporation and more.

A Bicentenary Grounded in Truth and Lasting Change

IANWA calls for recognition of Western Australian Aboriginal families' right to find, understand, and care for all records created about them over the last 200 years, as a pathway to supporting Aboriginal families' health and wellbeing and to support broader community understandings of our shared responsibilities in caring for Country for future generations. While acknowledging the important work of those working in this field across public and private archives and collections, the sector remains woefully under-resourced and

perpetuates inequities across our communities. Our call aligns with Recommendation 53 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), Recommendations 21–30B of Bringing Them Home (1997), and decades of academic, Industry, and community research on Indigenous recordkeeping, archives, and data sovereignty. We align our position with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Historical policies created and implemented by Western Australian governments resulted in administrative control over all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives statewide, with devastating impacts on all families affected. The records produced through those policies are not simply administrative objects; they are evidence of family, identity, language, culture, and ecological connections, and families have an inalienable human right to access them. From periods of separation, these records can return people home to their kinship, cultural knowledges, and understandings of how these connections were so violently damaged. Access to these records supports truth-telling, healing, family reunification, redress, return to Country, and knowledges of care for our ecosystems. These outcomes should matter to us all.

In a world where environmental degradation, social division, unrest, and violence are rising, Indigenous archives are not only our gateway to truth-telling, but also our capacity to collectively remember our responsibilities as humans in centering the health and wellbeing of all families, communities and our ecologies. In this way, the WA Government’s objectives for the 2029 Bicentenary will not be realised unless we overcome the entrenched socio-economic disadvantages and barriers to archive access that Aboriginal families face. Transitioning to self-determination in records access is an essential, practical outcome that will enable transformative statewide community healing and truth, and a structural legacy that will continue well beyond 2029.

Archive Access: Release the Archives to Aboriginal Families

Genealogy research is an ancient practice that has never been broken. Elders and on-Country family genealogists are encyclopedic knowledge holders who, with appropriate resourcing and self-determined access, can read archives and expertly locate and restore kinship, language and cultural connections. However, Aboriginal genealogists and their families report fragmented collections, inadequate cataloguing and indexing, unclear processes, repeated demands to prove identity and kinship, fees, long delays and limited transparency about what records exist and where. Requests for access to documents take ten months, eighteen months, and even two years. The pressure has intensified as families seek evidence for the WA Stolen Generations Redress Scheme.

Distance deepens these inequities. Families in regional and remote areas often cannot afford to travel to collecting institutions in Perth, or even Canberra, where records are also held. Many have limited internet access. Without adequate resourcing and access to archives to support Elders and family genealogists on-Country, communities have minimal access to the records and limited capacity to know what they hold.

Records are dispersed across state agencies, libraries, museums, universities, churches, missions, native title bodies, national institutions and private collections. Searching is complex and can be retraumatising, particularly as many require on-site viewing of records, away from family, cultural and emotional support. Existing Aboriginal family-history services and community-controlled organisations are carrying significant workloads without sufficient staff, infrastructure or sustained funding.

We call for free, online, and culturally safe access to records; transparent and consistent processes based on principles of self-determination; digitisation and word-searchable indexing; practical support and resourcing to interpret records; opportunities to add additional contexts and corrections; and the return or locally governed stewardship of copies. Access arrangements must also respect cultural authority, privacy and the need for some material to be mediated according to Aboriginal protocols.

IANWA Proposed Transition to Improved Access to Indigenous Archives

1. **Create a 2029 Aboriginal Records Access and Healing Fund** with sustained permanent funding from 2027 for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Indigenous archivists, genealogists, and family researchers to co-design and implement culturally appropriate records access priorities, processes and activities with government.
2. **Identify all records relating to Indigenous people** held in Western Australian Government agencies through a single register at the State Records Office. Release indexes already held in government agencies immediately through a single public online point such as the SRO Webpage.
3. **Build an Aboriginal archives workforce** through paid traineeships, scholarships and permanent roles for Indigenous archivists, records managers, digitisation staff, family-history researchers and cultural advisers. Place trained Aboriginal family-history navigators in metropolitan and regional locations and resource trauma-aware, cultural and family support.
4. **Deliver a statewide digitisation, indexing and discovery program** for police, court, family, language, cultural and anthropological records, with culturally informed searchable archival description, metadata and plain-language finding aids.
5. **Reform access and strengthen community control.** Create a culturally appropriate centralised single database for access. Co-design free, transparent and consistent access processes and standards, and investment in community-owned archival infrastructure.
6. **Co-design and implement access pathways to Private Collections** that hold Indigenous records such as pastoral, church, mission and mining archives.
7. **Provide regional and on-Country access** through mobile services, regional hubs, supported interlibrary loans, secure digital access and non-digital options, so families are not forced to travel to Perth and can explore records within the comfort of their own communities and cultural contexts.
8. **Create an Aboriginal-led truth-telling, return, and accountability program** by identifying Western Australian records held outside Western Australia, negotiating their return, supporting community education and exhibitions, and reporting on systems reform progress, including access times, regional reach, workforce outcomes, and family experiences.

Our Feelings About the Bicentenary

IANWA does not want the Bicentenary to celebrate colonisation as a success story of civilisation progress and to promote nationalism. A Country built and sustained through the suffering of Aboriginal people and the environment requires critical reflection, not celebration. As the Healing Foundation has asserted, the time to act is now, in addressing the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism on Aboriginal families and our ecologies. The bicentenary should not privilege further funding for colonial collections at the expense of decades of neglected Aboriginal family archives or privilege academic researchers' access to records above long-awaited Aboriginal families' access.

IANWA's Message to the Western Australian Government

By investing now, Western Australia can make 2029 a turning point: from inaccessible records to family connection; from institutional control to shared authority; and from commemoration alone to reflection, truth, healing and practical justice for all communities and for the ecosystems that give us all life. This turning point could be the moment Western Australia decides to remember its own humanity.

Signed,

Members of the Indigenous Archives Network of Western Australia (IANWA)