

DECCW Aboriginal Languages Policy

Language is our culture – culture is our language

Department of
Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW



Published by:
Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water
59–61 Goulburn Street, Sydney
PO Box A290
Sydney South 1232
Ph: (02) 9995 5000 (switchboard)
Ph: 131 555 (information & publications requests)
Fax: (02) 9995 5999
TTY: (02) 9211 4723
Email: info@environment.nsw.gov.au
Web: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/radiation

ISBN 978 1 74232 426 5
DECCW 2009/600
September 2009

The Aboriginal Languages Policy is copyright. DECCW allows the reproduction of material from this publication for educational and non-commercial purposes on the condition that the source, publisher and authorship are acknowledged.

Contents

- Purpose of the policy 1
- Background 2
- Guiding principles..... 5
- Policy..... 6
- References 10

Purpose of the policy

The purpose of this policy is to:

- implement the NSW Aboriginal Languages Strategic Plan under *Two Ways Together: New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012* (NSW Government 2008)
- guide staff and consultants employed by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) in the use of Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal languages may be used in DECCW publications, interpretive materials, signage and tours, and in fulfilling DECCW's cultural and heritage responsibilities. DECCW may be involved in the development of Aboriginal language programs, or other cultural activities where language may be a feature. The use of Aboriginal languages should be fostered across all DECCW.

A broader objective of the policy is to foster an understanding in DECCW and the community that Aboriginal languages are a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture, and should be protected and promoted.

Scope and application

This policy applies to all Groups and Divisions in DECCW.

Background

Language is one of the most significant aspects of the culture and heritage of any group. Aboriginal culture and knowledge systems are largely expressed verbally, through vocalising place names, stories and songs. Aboriginal languages express not only culture, but also kinship, relationship to the land and water (oceans and rivers) and environmental knowledge. They contain a complex conceptual framework for the living things on the land, the landscape and natural resources. Without language, the link between Aboriginal people and Country would be compromised and the benefit of Aboriginal knowledge may be lost.

Before European invasion, more than 250 indigenous languages, with over 600 dialects, were spoken in Australia. It is estimated that at least 70 of these languages were spoken in NSW (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2001).

It was common for many Aboriginal people in NSW to speak multiple languages. Some Aboriginal people spoke several different dialects as this was often essential for Aboriginal language groups to converse. Many language groups would come together for ceremonies to develop ways of governing social structures, boundaries and trade.

There has been a significant decrease in the use of Aboriginal languages since European invasion, and particularly during the last few decades. For example, there has been a decrease in the percentage of indigenous people speaking indigenous languages from 100% in 1800 to 13% in 1996 (Department of the Environment and Heritage 2001). In the 2006 census, 55,705 Aboriginal people spoke Aboriginal languages across Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). In NSW there were 1,941 Aboriginal people that spoke Aboriginal languages. Regardless of the ongoing challenges and setbacks, the struggle of Aboriginal communities to maintain, revive and revitalise their languages and cultures has been continuous.

Aboriginal knowledge of natural and cultural land management is concealed in Aboriginal language. Language is one way in which Aboriginal people express and interpret their knowledge of and connection to natural and cultural landscapes.

Importance of revitalising Aboriginal languages

Strong culture is important in overcoming many challenges facing Aboriginal communities today. The social and economic problems in Aboriginal communities can be linked to cultural and other dispossession over a long period of time. The recognition, promotion and rebuilding of culture is a significant factor in strengthening the wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

Strong culture is also important in enabling effective partnerships between NSW Government agencies and Aboriginal communities. For example, Aboriginal knowledge of cultural and heritage values is important to the NSW Government's regional land use planning, natural resource management and conservation programs.

The maintenance and use of diverse Aboriginal languages should be a consideration in any government environmental, land and sea management, social and economic, and culture and heritage strategy.

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy was developed under *Two Ways Together: New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012* (NSW Government 2008). The languages policy and the subsequent strategic plan aim to 'assist Aboriginal people and communities across NSW to revitalise traditional languages, as a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture and as a unique component of the Australian heritage'. The policy and strategic plan focus on four main areas:

- programs in Aboriginal communities
- education programs
- programs in gaols and detention centres
- Aboriginal language in the broader community.

The policy requires that all NSW Government agencies engage in its implementation. However, some agencies have the primary responsibilities for particular focus areas. These are the:

- NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs
- NSW Office of the Board of Studies
- NSW Department of Education and Training
- NSW Department of Corrective Services.

DECCW is one of the agencies responsible for implementing the fourth key result area, i.e. 'Aboriginal languages in the broader community'. While the *DECCW Aboriginal Languages Policy* predominantly deals with this area, it also addresses issues associated with the first key result area: 'Programs in Aboriginal communities'.

Aboriginal languages and DECCW

Two Ways Together: New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012 (NSW Government 2008) requires DECCW to develop this Aboriginal languages policy, which is also a strategic action for development under DECCW's internal Aboriginal Affairs Action Plan 2007–2009.

The *DECCW Aboriginal Languages Policy* is consistent with the Cultural Heritage Strategic Policy, focus area one: 'Fostering connection with heritage', and with *Aboriginal people, the environment and conservation principles* (Department of Environment and Climate Change 2008) which recognise the rights and interests of Aboriginal people in engaging in the work of DECCW.

Definitions

Traditional owners: people who, through membership of a group or clan, are responsible for caring for a particular Country. Traditional owners are authorised to speak for Country and its heritage. Authorisation to speak for Country and heritage may be as a senior traditional owner and Elder, or in more recent times, as a registered Native Title claimant (Australian Heritage Commission 2002).

Parks: land acquired or reserved under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

Aboriginal English: soon after first contact with non-Aboriginal people in NSW, forms of speech developed that reflected this contact. One legacy of these new forms of speech is a widespread use of what is known as Aboriginal English (Hosking et al 2000). Today, Aboriginal English is the first language of many Aboriginal children in NSW and is a

recognised form of communication in NSW public schools (NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998).

Aboriginal English uses words, patterns and rhythms from both English and Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English are usually mutually intelligible, although there are major differences in vocabulary, grammar, meaning, sounding system, gesturing and socio-cultural context (Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992).

Aboriginal community: for the purpose of the interpretation of this document, Aboriginal community means:

- Native Title holders/claimants
- traditional owners
- Elders groups/councils
- knowledge holders
- interested family groups
- registered Aboriginal organisations
- NSW Aboriginal Land Council
- local Aboriginal land councils.

Relevant legislation or other mandating instruments

Legislation and mandating instruments the policy supports are:

- *Two Ways Together, New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012* (NSW Government 2008)
- *NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy* (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2001)
- *Native Title Act 1993*
- *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*
- *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*
- *Anti Discrimination Act 1991*.

Guiding principles

- 1 Language is an irreplaceable aspect of Aboriginal culture.
- 2 Revitalising and maintaining Aboriginal languages is important for the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities.
- 3 There are many Aboriginal languages in NSW, each with their own unique dialects. While there are some similarities of words and pronunciation throughout many neighbouring regional language groups, DECCW acknowledges there are diverse and distinct linguistic groups.
- 4 Language should be celebrated, embraced and shared with the wider community in recognition of the significance of Aboriginal culture and Country.
- 5 The use of Aboriginal languages through publications, education, park management and public programs has the potential to positively influence the general public.
- 6 Using Aboriginal languages to identify features of DECCW-managed lands publicly recognises Aboriginal people's connection to the land and the importance of the land to Aboriginal people.
- 7 Aboriginal language is a key component of storytelling in communicating the values of natural and cultural heritage in the landscapes of NSW.
- 8 Aboriginal culture is traditionally an oral culture. However, Aboriginal symbols and art are traditional methods of recording and communicating stories and history, and marking boundaries.
- 9 Aboriginal English is used by Aboriginal people throughout NSW, and is a fundamental component of contemporary Aboriginal language.
- 10 There is an integrated approach to Aboriginal language renewal in the NSW Government, which DECCW is responsible for participating in.
- 11 Aboriginal cultural and intellectual property rights to language must be respected and protected.

Policy

1 Supporting Aboriginal communities in the revival of their language

- 1.1 DECCW will be involved in the revival of Aboriginal languages through its educational programs, projects and publications, e.g. brochures, promotional materials, signage, interpretive materials and infrastructure, education curriculum materials developed with the NSW Department of Education and tours, and through marketing and advertising activities across DECCW.
- 1.2 DECCW will work with Aboriginal communities in their efforts to develop language revitalisation programs.
- 1.3 Projects and programs which involve Aboriginal languages will be developed with appropriate consultation and partnership with Aboriginal communities from the initial stages through to the end product.

2 Acknowledgement and respect

- 2.1 New signage on DECCW-owned and managed lands will include an 'Acknowledgment of Country', advising visitors of the language, nation and the people of the area. Where agreed with the local community, this signage may also include a 'Welcome to Country' from these communities in the local Aboriginal languages.
- 2.2 The type and location of such signage will be determined on a park by park basis in consultation with the local Aboriginal community, as set out in the signage policy and signage manual.
- 2.3 Signage policies developed by DECCW will consider the broader use of Aboriginal language in DECCW signage and provide clear guidance to staff.
- 2.4 Community members who are invited to give a 'Welcome to Country' will be given the opportunity to use their traditional language.
- 2.5 Consensus will be sought with the local Aboriginal communities, where possible, on issues relating to practical spelling, pronunciation and terminologies.

3 Revival of Aboriginal language names for DECCW-managed land

- 3.1 Where agreed with the relevant Aboriginal management body, co-managed reserves will be given either an Aboriginal name or dual name.
- 3.2 DECCW policy on park names and names of prominent places prioritises the use of Aboriginal names or dual names (see Park Names Policy). Consultation is a part of the process to ensure that these names and the use of language on signs in parks are appropriate and accepted by the community.
- 3.3 The names of reserves which currently have Aboriginal names will be reviewed as part of the statutory plan of management review for each park, to ensure that the language is appropriate.

- 3.4 Any proposals to change the name of a place or park will be discussed with the Geographical Names Board.

4 Use of Aboriginal language in interpretation and educational programs

- 4.1 DECCW will encourage the use of Aboriginal languages where appropriate in Discovery and other educational programs.
- 4.2 All DECCW language-based educational programs will be developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and in conjunction with the NSW Department of Education and Training to ensure consistency of policies across government and to reduce the demand on cultural knowledge holders and communities.

5 Use of Aboriginal language in DECCW publications and signage

- 5.1 Aboriginal English should be used when appropriate for developing programs, projects, and publications that have a predominantly Aboriginal community audience and a statewide focus.
- 5.2 When Aboriginal English is used in programs, projects and publications, consultation with Aboriginal communities should still occur.
- 5.3 DECCW will develop and progressively amend relevant signage and interpretation policies and guidelines to include information on the incorporation of Aboriginal languages.
- 5.4 The signage and interpretation guidelines will consider how to use Aboriginal language when naming places, flora and fauna on signage on DECCW-managed lands. These will include consulting or negotiating with the local Aboriginal community to ensure that accepted language and terminology are used.
- 5.5 The interpretation policy will consider the need for dual language on information and interpretation signs.
- 5.6 DECCW will collect language titles and names of places, flora and fauna in partnership with Aboriginal communities and other government agencies. This list will ensure that the local Aboriginal language names for local native plants and animals are used in locally-based activities publications.

Aboriginal languages, phrases and symbols should be used where appropriate as a campaign tool or a logo to depict the Aboriginal cultural heritage responsibilities of DECCW in a particular area.

Use of language on signage or in publications may also include supporting symbols, visual art and other non-verbal interpretive artwork.

6 Protecting indigenous cultural and intellectual property

- 6.1 Whenever Aboriginal languages, phrases or symbols are sourced from copyrighted sources (e.g. word lists, books, dictionaries and recordings) and are used in signage or publications, permission to use that information must be sought from the copyright holder. Permission should also be sought from the relevant Aboriginal person or community which provided that information

if the copyright holder is not an Aboriginal person from the relevant language area.

- 6.2 Where language, phrases or symbols have not been recorded (and so are not subject to any copyright), DECCW should seek permission from the local Aboriginal community which provided the verbal information to DECCW to use that language information.
- 6.3 Intellectual property in any language information collected or used by DECCW will be protected in accordance with the DECCW intellectual property framework. Appropriate approval will be obtained from the people providing that information for the collection and use of that language.

7 Ensuring research into Aboriginal language is conducted

- 7.1 Aboriginal language research will be incorporated into DECCW's cultural heritage research agenda where appropriate. This research will be carried out in collaboration with Aboriginal communities.
- 7.2 DECCW research into Aboriginal language will be linked to other research in this area being carried out by Aboriginal families, Aboriginal community language centres, Department of Education and Training and other government agencies and educational institutions e.g. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Aboriginal languages research and resources centres, universities and museums, to provide a collaborative approach to assist Aboriginal communities in language revitalisation research projects.
- 7.3 DECCW staff, particularly Aboriginal staff, will be encouraged to learn and use Aboriginal languages as an aspect of their professional development.

Related policies and other documents

State Plan – a new direction for NSW (visit www.nsw.gov.au/stateplan)

DECCW Aboriginal Community Engagement Framework

DECCW Parks Naming Policy

Botanic Gardens Trust Strategy

Parks and Wildlife Group Interpretation Policy

Culture and Heritage Information Policy

Parks and Wildlife Division Partnerships Policy

Cultural Heritage Division Research Agenda

DECCW Cultural Heritage Strategic Policy

DECCW Two Ways Together Implementation Plan

DECCW Intellectual Property Framework

DECC Welcome to Country

Policy review

The Culture and Heritage Division of DECCW is responsible for coordinating the review of this policy. Reviews will be undertaken at least every five years, and more frequently if changes in legislation, policies or other areas require review. The next scheduled review is due in June 2013.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Census community profile series: Australia*, visit <http://abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/home?opendocument>
- Australian Heritage Commission 2002, *Ask first – a guide to respecting indigenous heritage place and values*, The Australian Heritage Commission Canberra, visit www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/publications/commission/books/ask-first
- Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992, *Language and culture: a matter of survival. Report of the inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language maintenance*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service
- Department of Environment and Climate Change 2008, *Aboriginal people, the environment and conservation principles*
- Department of the Environment and Heritage 2001, *State of indigenous languages in Australia*
- Hosking DF, Lonsdale TJ, Troy JF and Walsh MJ 2000, *Strong language strong culture – NSW strategic language study final report and strategy action plan*, report prepared for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- McConvell P and Thieberger N 2001, 'State of Indigenous languages in Australia 2001, Australia State of the Environment Second Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage)', Department of the Environment and Heritage Canberra, visit www.ea.gov.au/soe/techpapers/index.html
- NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2001, *Aboriginal languages*, visit www.daa.nsw.gov.au/landandculture/language.html
- NSW Government 2008, *Two Ways Together: New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012*, visit www.daa.nsw.gov.au/policies/policy.html
- NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998, *NSW early childhood Aboriginal literacy resource kit*, Board of Studies, Sydney