



Component 5: Information handling & reporting

In this component we look at the expected outcomes of regional studies for the major stakeholders, as a way of ensuring that the full benefits of regional studies will be realised when such studies are commissioned.

First, however, some considerations for information handling are discussed because these need to be understood before any 'outcome' can be achieved.

Information handling

To ensure the regional study process runs smoothly, Aboriginal communities should provide guidance as to the appropriate method for documenting, reporting, and handling of cultural heritage information. Aboriginal peoples' knowledge of their cultural heritage places and pathways, resource use, and customs and spirituality lies at the core of a community's identity and vibrancy. The process of collecting and presenting this information, therefore, needs to be done with respect and sensitivity.

Henderson et al. (2002, p. 483) provide guidelines for information control and reporting when working with Aboriginal communities in Victoria. These guidelines could be applied in any region of Australia:

In projects to date, the raw data have been held by the... [Aboriginal community]... (for confidentiality) and copies of interview transcripts have been given to specific interviewees. Research reports are given to the community and relevant organisations, after discussion, and these are owned by the community. Generally, communities insist on constructive reporting and tend to reject reports that could be politically damaging. Communities and organisations maintain the right to ask for further analysis and other information from the project to assist in addressing their own goals. Academic publications tend to be written by ... [researchers] ..., but are approved by the partnership committee and relevant communities and organisations before submission for publication.

The use and control of the data should be negotiated and agreed upon at the outset (Component 1). Aboriginal communities have the right to own data collected concerning their community and heritage. The community has the right to control the use of any data collected and how and where they are reported. All the information that is gathered, including research, photographs, interviews, and maps, remains the property of the Aboriginal community(s) unless another agreement has been established with the researcher(s). Any report must acknowledge the participation and assistance of the community in formulating the direction of the study. Consent to print and/or publish the report must be obtained from the community. The return or storage of the information that is collected should also be negotiated and agreed upon from the outset (Henderson et al. 2002).

Sensitive information

Cultural or traditional information must be accommodated with respect and sensitivity. This issue is summarised by English et al (1998, p. 187):

For many Aboriginal people past experiences with researchers has shown that the sharing of their cultural knowledge ostensibly means a loss of ownership of that knowledge, as it is often used without permission. Additionally, there is quite often a lack of understanding for the proper inclusion of information in publications, for interpretive purposes, in postgraduate work, or for inclusion in Aboriginal heritage registers.

The control of cultural knowledge is fundamental to Aboriginal identity and custom. Certain places are likely to have associated information of a confidential or sensitive nature. In a regional study, it is expected that culturally sensitive information about a place will not be divulged. Aboriginal consultants may not be explicit about why a site or place holds significance. Rather, the significance of the place is communicated through their mode of speaking. Often, it will be expressed through recommendations or misgivings about the nature of development in the vicinity of place. An Aboriginal consultant, for example, might convey the importance of a bend in a creek by repeatedly suggesting the proposed development is 'too close' without going into any specifics about the social importance/significance of the place. Here the researcher is aware of the importance of

protecting this place but has little information to draw upon in justifying a recommendation for the place's protection or linking the place to a specific theme.

However, the advantage of a regional investigation is that individual places are second to 'areas', insofar as we are concerned with identifying the spatial component of themes more than individual places. Furthermore, it is likely that sufficient (perhaps less sensitive) information has been gathered to assess a region on the basis of the range of places already documented as part of the archaeological, historical, and wild resource-use landscape. Indeed, a focus on a place-by-place assessment hampers an integrated approach in documenting the spatial character of the region.

Mapping

Mapping is a central component of a regional study. There are ways of ensuring that culturally sensitive information remains confidential while still releasing information in a format to assist in the planning process. A common approach is to provide a map for the community that displays all recorded information, and another map for planners showing less detailed cultural information (without any site-specific locations). In other words, 'maps are produced at a scale which makes accurate spatial identification difficult' (Adams 2001, p. 49).

One issue to note here is that maps derived from consultation with the community are 'continuously redefined or renegotiated, both with respect to country and to phenomena which create significance' (Adams 2001, p. 49). This issue not only emphasises the importance of ongoing consultation and refinement of regional studies, but also ensures that those who use the maps for specific purposes understand that they serve only to convey the overall context of Aboriginal cultural heritage in the region. Adams (2001, p. 49) summarises this issue in a cultural heritage assessment of the Illawarra region:

In this report there are maps showing the conjunction between particular vegetation communities and Aboriginal middens, to indicate very broadly some landscape relationships between Aboriginal resource areas and past living areas. Actual understandings and use of these landscapes and resources are likely to

have been, and in fact remain, very complex. The maps show none of the detail or complexity and run the risk of suggesting that relationships were only with the particular, mapped areas.

Reporting

A community-level report should also be completed in tandem with a public report, with the latter not revealing any sensitive information. Purcell (2002a, p. 17) describes how this separation of reports worked for the Brigalow Belt Bioregion study:

A descriptive overview of the landforms associated with the Bioregion and their potential cultural sensitivity, based on sites, is provided in this report to assist in regional planning bodies in conservation planning. Interested parties wishing to access information gathered during the assessment will be required to consult with the relevant LALC (Local Aboriginal Land Council). This approach provides Aboriginal people with more control of cultural heritage information. Control of cultural heritage information has been a strong desire of Aboriginal communities throughout the BBSB Bioregion.

This approach was used successfully in the Coffs Harbour regional Aboriginal heritage study:

Undertakings were therefore given that each group would have complete control over their information and be consulted each step of the way about how information collected was being used. It was also agreed that the information collected would be collated and returned to the group at the end of the project. The acknowledgment of, and respect for, the authority of knowledge holders and the basis of their claim for controlling how their knowledge is used was of fundamental importance in setting the project off on a sound footing (Goulding 2001, p. 17).

To summarise, this component has not outlined a specific method for information handling and control; rather, it has raised the issues that need to be considered and worked out during the course of a regional study:

Intellectual property and control are issues of considerable concern in indigenous communities... Negotiating appropriate ways to record, store and manage Aboriginal spatial information is a large and evolving task... (Adams 2001, p. 49).