The Aboriginal people of Australia are part of the oldest continuous living culture in human history. Aboriginal people have a rich culture involving a custom, lore and value system based on the sustainability of their spiritual connection, belonging, obligation and responsibility to care for their land, their people and their environment.

Aboriginal peoples’ intimate knowledge of the natural resources and ecosystems of their areas, developed through long and sustained contact, and their respect for the spirits which inhabit these places, mould their life on the land. This knowledge is derived from Aboriginal peoples’ experience in living for centuries in close harmony with the land. It means knowing the natural environment and its resources, the use of natural resources and the relationship of people to the land and to each other.

Through emphasising the fundamental role of relationship to the environment in the lives of Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal cultural knowledge can be defined as:

… accumulated knowledge which encompasses spiritual relationships, relationships with the natural environment and the sustainable use of natural resources, and relationships between people, which are reflected in language, narratives, social organisation, values, beliefs, and cultural laws and customs … (Andrews 2006)

Aboriginal cultural knowledge might be understood as the ways in which Aboriginal people regard and act out their relationships with each other, with their lands and environments, and with their ancestors.

Unlike the written word, Aboriginal cultural knowledge is not static, but responds to change through absorbing new information and adapting to its implications. Aboriginal cultural knowledge is bequeathed through oral tradition (song, story, art, language and dance) from generation to generation, and embodies and preserves the relationship to the land. Cultural places and landscapes ‘house’ these stories, and protection of these places and landscapes is key to the long-term survival of these stories in Aboriginal culture.

Notably, specific details and aspects or areas of cultural knowledge are generally held and maintained by individuals or within particular family groups. Although the broader community may be aware of the general features or elements of that knowledge, it is not a common practice within Aboriginal society for detailed cultural knowledge to be vested in the broader community or within Aboriginal community organisations, although it is these organisations that often defer to particular individuals or family groups as being the knowledge-holders of particular sets of cultural knowledge about places or the environment.
Following the arrival of Europeans, many Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their traditional land. This was exacerbated by subsequent introduction of government laws and policies.

Notwithstanding this, Aboriginal people throughout New South Wales who, through lore and custom, hold cultural knowledge continue their cultural connection in contemporary society. They continue to maintain a deep respect for their ancestral belief system, lore and customs and responsibilities. They respect their obligations to protect and conserve their culture and heritage and care for their traditional lands or Country.

For further information about cultural knowledge and these relations, refer to Fact sheet 2: What is a cultural landscape?

Reference

Andrews G, Daylight C, Hunt J. et al 2006. Aboriginal cultural heritage landscape mapping of coastal NSW, prepared for the Comprehensive Coastal Assessment by the NSW Department of Natural Resources, Sydney, NSW.