Aboriginal Heritage and Wellbeing
This book is co-written by Berenice Carrington and Pamela Young.

Many community members have contributed to the book through the stories, memories and ideas they have shared, and DECCW acknowledges the Intellectual Property Rights of the Aboriginal people whose stories are featured in this publication. All artworks featured in this book remain the intellectual property of the artists. DECCW has endeavoured to faithfully represent individual and community experiences and has made every reasonable effort to ensure information and individual contributions are presented accurately.

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Aboriginal Heritage and Wellbeing

Aboriginal readers please note:
The authors of this publication warn that it may contain information, names, images or references to deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are felt to be culturally sensitive and thus could inadvertently be distressing or offensive.
DECCW Aboriginal Women’s & Men’s Heritage Series Evaluation

Berenice Carrington and Pamela Young 2009

We would like to acknowledge all the Elders and older community members, past and present, who recorded their stories and published them in the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series coordinated by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water, NSW (DECCW). We were privileged to speak to many of these story-tellers. We thank each one of you for the time that you gave to us and we thank your communities for their hospitality.

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**Nambucca** – staff at the Goori Broadcasters of Radio Nambucca; staff and members of the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative; and members of the Gumbaynggirr Nambucca Valley Elders Choir.

**Nowra** – Rod Wellington and Graham Moore, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officers; and Deidre Martin, Aboriginal Discovery Coordinator.

**Brungle & Tumut** – Dean Freeman, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer; Vikki Parsley, Aboriginal Project Officer Natural Resource Management; members of the Tumut Brungle Aboriginal Land Council; staff at the Brungle Health Centre; and staff and members of the Cooee Centre Tumut.

**Port Stephens** – Viola Brown; Carol Ridgeway Bissett; and Val Merrick.

**Bourke** – Melissa Prince, Cadet Ranger; and Phil Sullivan, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer.

**Walgett & Collarenebri** – April Sullivan; Wendy Spencer; Jason Wilson. Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer; the staff at the Dharrriwaa Elders Group; and the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS).

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1 Winnie Marlowe, a contributor to the Brungle & Tumut Heritage book.
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Wellbeing is an everyday event that can be connected to all the things that we do.

Pamela Young
Introduction: Aboriginal communities, heritage, wellbeing and the government

Berenice Carrington

The Wellbeing Research Project

This book has emerged from the Wellbeing in Aboriginal Communities research project, begun in January 2006 with the purpose of identifying ways to demonstrate how Aboriginal heritage contributes to the health of Aboriginal communities. The book is jointly authored by Pamela Young and Berenice Carrington. Our job was to seek community collaboration to record Aboriginal concepts of heritage and to describe how that heritage is a part of people’s everyday lives. The issues of health and heritage are very relevant to the work that the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) does because the organisation needs to understand how its role in heritage and environmental management can impact either positively or negatively on community health. DECCW, along with all other NSW government departments has responsibilities under the NSW State Plan to increase the effectiveness of its programs to better meet the needs of Aboriginal communities.

We were able to be well informed about Aboriginal concepts of health, because Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal non-government organisations have done a lot of work over the last 20 years to put Aboriginal health into Aboriginal cultural terms of reference. For example, in 1989 the National Aboriginal Health Strategy produced the following foundational definition: “Aboriginal health” means not just the physical well-being of an individual, but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total well-being of their Community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.1 2

This book considers Aboriginal heritage from the standpoint of the present. What we have aimed to do is to find out how people feel about sharing information with the government, what it is like from a community perspective to work with government to look after Aboriginal heritage, and how people feel that their own involvement in and control of their heritage affects their quality of life.

For the purposes of our research project, the concept of wellbeing is understood to be greater than general happiness, health, welfare or safety. As Pamela Young describes it, wellbeing is an everyday event that can be connected to all things that we do. Wellbeing is the satisfaction that people get from doing things their own way, sometimes according to the values that are important to them, and which results in positive feelings of self expression. The aim of this research is to understand how and why heritage is important to Aboriginal people’s wellbeing and by extension to use this understanding as a foundation for communication with Aboriginal communities. It is hoped that such an understanding will enable DECCW and other government departments to enhance their partnerships with Aboriginal communities.

We didn’t set out to create a single definition of wellbeing as it applies to Aboriginal heritage and culture. Instead, we have sought to leave the idea of wellbeing open to interpretation by the Aboriginal people who have participated in the project. When Pamela and I started conversations with people we described the Wellbeing Project as ‘being about your quality of life and how you feel about the contribution that your culture and heritage makes to that’. 3

This book presents an evaluation of a series of books produced by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW (DECCW), the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series, which record the lives and times of elder members of Aboriginal communities. The series grew from a small scale research project on the North Coast which resulted in the publication of Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nambucca in 2003 to a total of twelve books to date. Many of the books are available as free downloads from the DECCW website. 4

We were able to go back to seven of the communities to ask how the experience of contributing to the Heritage Series has affected those who participated. The evaluation takes the form of feedback compiled over a period of two years and is based on conversations with many of the story-tellers published in the Heritage Series. We came to understand that contributing to the creation of the Heritage Series books had been a significant experience for many. A number of the Elders who told their stories were doing so for the first time and spoke to us about the courage that it took for them to look back at the past and recall their life experiences. These were Elders who had grown up in difficult times, often under considerable scrutiny from government officials, and who enjoyed few of the freedoms that many Australian citizens take for granted today.

One of the inspirations for this generation of Elders to tell their stories is the hope that it will help the generations that follow them appreciate the freedom and opportunities that are available to Aboriginal people now. They see these books as a way of educating younger generations of their communities about the importance of Aboriginal heritage and of social values, such as respect, that have guided them in their lives.

The Heritage Series has become a community resource and has resulted in local knowledge building and sharing, and new relationships between Elders and local schools and libraries, correctional institutions, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, and health centres. The impact of the school programs is illustrated by the case of a young man in Port Stephens who told us how the publication of Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Port Stephens was the first physical evidence that became available at his school to show that there was a local living Aboriginal culture. We recorded many stories from Elders who described how their grandchildren have become excited about their heritage from reading the books and being able to show them to other people. The books provide evidence of Aboriginal heritage at a local level which young people feel comfortable about identifying with, because it is about family and shared history.
The Heritage Series has also played a significant role in the personal lives of a number of Aboriginal people. Families that have experienced dislocation, due to past government policies or for other reasons, have found that these books have helped them to locate lost relations and to discover expanded family connections. The books have also made it easier for some people to talk about the past. After the first few books were published, people were able to anticipate what would happen if they did something similar and this has given people the confidence to record and publish their life stories in the Heritage Series.

This book assesses the value to Aboriginal people of contributing personal stories to the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series. The first chapter presents an investigation of a case in point, the 2008 launch of Aboriginal Men and Women’s Heritage: Eurobodalla. We were able to record the speeches on the day of the book launch as well as to interview some of the community members who published their stories in it. The speeches and interviews tell us about the importance of the Heritage book to this community.

Chapters four to nine present a collection of feedback from many of the Elders and their relatives who participated in the Heritage Series. The feedback is brought together with the recollections of Kath Schilling, who initiated the Heritage Series as Aboriginal Women’s Heritage Coordinator at DECCW, and collaborated with each community to produce the books. The Heritage books that we have collected feedback on are Nambucca, Nowra, Brungle & Tumut, Port Stephens, Bourke, and Walgett & Collarenebu. Sadly, we lacked the time and the resources to speak to the story-tellers who produced the Heritage books in the Heritage Series for Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Nepean, and Ballina & Cabbage Tree Island.

This book provides a wealth of encouragement and advice for other communities wanting to develop similar projects and for those who wish to facilitate them.

The Wellbeing Research Project was specifically aimed at identifying the effects on Aboriginal people’s wellbeing from their participation in government programs concerned with Aboriginal heritage. As we undertook the evaluation of the Heritage Series, it became clear that our Aboriginal colleagues who conduct research in Aboriginal communities from within the government context as government employees also have a very valuable perspective on heritage and wellbeing.

The second chapter reflects on the experiences and philosophies of two Aboriginal researchers, Kath Schilling and the late Ray Kelly, who was one of the founding members of the National Parks and Wildlife Service’s Aboriginal Sites of Significance survey team in the 1970s. My analysis of their reflections is not framed by contemporary discussions of Aboriginal research methodologies. Rather, it describes what it was like for them as Aboriginal people and as government employees to conduct research in Aboriginal communities.

They are brought together in this chapter as producers of work which continues to be of significance to Aboriginal communities. A motivation that they had in common was the belief that government has a responsibility to engage with the cultural lives and lived heritage of Aboriginal communities. The central concern to their research has not been methodological as such, but a commitment to the social agendas of the communities with which they worked. For them, the role of government is to create ways to work within a cultural context that benefits communities.

In the third chapter, Pamela Young describes her experience of joining this project as a research partner. Pamela’s theme is ‘no more silence, we do have a voice’. Where she discusses the significance of Aboriginal writing and considers the role of oral history in this context. Pamela also reflects on the emotional journeys that she shared with many of the women and men who have been involved in the process of recording their life stories.

Our tenth chapter builds on interviews with Aboriginal staff who work in conservation and management of Aboriginal heritage in DECCW. The words of our Aboriginal work mates are illuminating because their work often requires them to incorporate what it means to be a person with Aboriginal heritage and cultural values in today’s society whilst also functioning within the policy context of the government of the day. As well as presenting Aboriginal people’s perspectives on what wellbeing means to them, the chapter was also motivated by a desire to address the question of whether working within the area of Aboriginal culture and heritage enhances one’s wellbeing.

The Wellbeing Research Project has also sponsored two Aboriginal postgraduate students to link their research to government policy concerned with wellbeing and Aboriginal heritage. Vicki Grieves’ paper Indigenous Wellbeing: A Framework for Government’s Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Activities analyses the philosophical and political ideas which underpin a selection of current policies concerning Aboriginal culture and heritage. The paper features the results of a series of focus group discussions conducted with Aboriginal students studying government policy at Eora TAFE College, Sydney. Vicki’s report is available at www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

The second post graduate student, Kerry Arabena produced the paper, Indigenous Epistemology and Wellbeing: Universe Referent Citizenship. This draws on her recent research results from interviews with Aboriginal people about how they see and interact with the universe. She considers how this might relate to DECCW’s conservation and environment responsibilities. This project outlines a model of the ‘Universal Citizen’, and uses a framework that connects Indigenous philosophies with ecological perspectives to underpin strategies for living in the twenty first century. The framework synthesises the relationships between Indigenous and ecological knowledge, place and sustainable citizen states in Australia. Kerry’s paper is published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and is available at: http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/discussion.html

What should government research about wellbeing?

The exploration of the link between identity, culture and wellbeing needs careful handling by a government based research project. In particular it requires respect for the personal privacy of Aboriginal participants and recognition of their freedom to run their own lives. Gavin Andrews’ outlined his understanding of the limitations of government involvement in culture to me:

Government can’t intervene in culture… The government has a role in heritage, because it’s collectively owned by the whole of society; it’s the ‘heritage of the people’. Heritage starts from today and goes all the way back. The government doesn’t have a management role in culture. That belongs to the individual. If government wants a role in
cultural expression? While Gavin acknowledges cultural expression as a valid point of engagement for government, are oral histories a form of cultural expression?

In the same conversation Gavin also talked about how he sees culture and heritage as being ‘inextricably linked…what I believe belongs to me. What I manifest and leave belongs to all’. Gavin’s use of the word ‘manifest’ suggests that his description includes cultural expression. While Gavin’s way of showing the difference between culture and heritage restricts his example to himself, what happens when the culture and heritage that we want to look at straddles public and private worlds?

An oral history can be thought of as someone’s personal thoughts which they have provided for the public record. Are these published personal thoughts (Aboriginal oral histories) valid material for research? Although it is generally accepted that published material in the public domain may be accessed for research purposes, past use of such material in the public domain has demonstrated that this is a complex issue.6

While a storyteller is alive, they may well expect to be approached to give their permission for the use of their story by any researcher and to be given the opportunity to consider and comment on the research findings. Further, the integrity of that story must be maintained so that in the eyes of the story-teller, it has not become someone else’s story. Change of context must not lead to change of meaning.

The Heritage Series can be looked at as a collective level of cultural activity on the one hand, and on the other as a collection of private lives. Although the books record the stories of individuals, the process of publishing them together in one book involves these individuals’ participation in a community project. If our evaluation looks at this latter part of the experience – the story-tellers’ participation in a community project – we have a useful topic for our evaluation, which does not encroach on the content of the life stories. Our aim was not to assess the content of the stories themselves, but rather to evaluate the experience of participation in a publication project. Our evaluation of a selection of the Heritage books takes this as its starting point.

A further aim of the evaluation was to learn about the approaches that the storytellers and their communities have to ‘living heritage’. The key intention of the Heritage Series was to record personal stories and tap into the oral knowledge that Aboriginal story-tellers have to share, be it historical, traditional or contemporary. Thus they describe heritage which is part of everyday lived experience and is inextricably linked to these individuals and their families within present day Aboriginal communities.

Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, DECCW’s role is to work with Aboriginal people in the management of Aboriginal heritage in NSW. To achieve this successfully, the Department needs to understand Aboriginal people’s approaches to heritage management. Gavin Andrews describes heritage as something that ‘starts from today and goes all the way back’. This book seeks to explore and understand the meaning that this description of continuity has for a diverse range of Aboriginal people who are active in Aboriginal cultural heritage management. In the chapters that follow we hear from many of the participants in the six books from the Aboriginal Heritage Series and also from a number of DECCW Aboriginal staff.

Our purpose is to contribute to building a picture of wellbeing from Aboriginal perspectives. Hence, rather than having a fixed definition of wellbeing, we have sought to find out how the people that we are speaking to, think about and describe their quality of life.

The purpose of our evaluation of the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series

The popularity of the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series was the main stimulus for DECCW to focus on these books. Working out the best approach for evaluating the series was important to us, because this was the first time that the Research Section had invited participants to give us their feedback on one of our collaborative oral history projects with Aboriginal communities.

Pamela Young6 and Berenice Carrington involved Kath Schilling in every step of the process, because her knowledge as the original coordinator of the Heritage Series would be essential to our work. From our early discussions with Kath we learned about what she had set out to achieve with the series. Kath’s main aim was that the life stories of Elders and older Aboriginal people in communities would become widely appreciated and be seen as heritage that is highly valued by Aboriginal communities.

Kath talked to us about wanting to build a bridge between each Aboriginal community and DECCW and for this bridge to become a lasting relationship that would give the community members a foundation to approach DECCW whenever there was a role for government in the community’s management of its heritage. Kath also spoke about how important it had been to her for participants to gain positive benefits from having their stories published. Kath aimed for people to become comfortable with looking back at the past and for them to see that by telling their stories they had made a significant contribution to Aboriginal heritage.

The evaluation we have undertaken has been shaped by the people who told their stories in the Heritage Series. The word ‘evaluation’ is commonly associated with quite formal processes that are concerned with producing measurable and defensible results. Consequently, a formal evaluation would involve the design of a structure to collect information for analysis. The accuracy of the results of the formal evaluation would depend upon the maintenance of independence and consistency between what constitutes the structure of the evaluation and the information collected by it. By contrast, our evaluation is informal, it has gained its structure from the people who participated in it.
and from the information that they gave to us. All the same, it is a very rigorous evaluation that gains its accuracy from the high degree of participation in it by the Aboriginal story-tellers from the Heritage Series.

When Pamela first began to speak on the phone to people who had recorded their stories in the Heritage Series, she found that they were uncomfortable with the notion of participating in an evaluation. The mostly older Aboriginal people who had participated in the series are from a generation who experienced considerable government control over their lives. A frequent reaction from the Heritage Series participants to the proposal for the evaluation was that they felt that their life stories were going to be the subject of some sort of critical examination.

The people who Pamela spoke to wanted to know what an evaluation of the Heritage Series would achieve for them. This helped us to identify that the purpose of our evaluation was to find out about what the story-tellers had gained from the experience of recording and publishing their life stories in the Heritage Series, rather than an analysis of the content. We had no preconceived ideas about how that should be done. We were, however, determined to provide an evaluative process that would encourage a high degree of participation both in terms of the number of story-tellers from the Heritage Series, as well as the range of topics that they might discuss with us.

We would invite people to tell us about their experiences while recording their stories. The kinds of questions we asked were:

**How did you feel after the book was published?**

**Did anything change in your world as a result of doing the books?**

**What advice would you give to a community starting out on the process of making one of the Heritage books?**

However, we did not have a fixed list of questions. We preferred to just get a conversation started and leave it up to the people we were with to tell us what they thought. Initially, we had spoken to story-tellers on the phone. But when we realised that people preferred to talk to us in person, we changed our approach and took them up on their invitations to visit them. We would fit in with the way people wanted to participate; in some communities we spoke to people in groups, in others we spoke to people individually in their homes, and in others we did both.


It was hard to select which books to review and which ones to leave out. We did not have enough resources to include all of the books in the evaluation. We decided that it would be helpful to track the first few books in the series, because these ones paved the way for the others. The foundational books included Nambucca, Nowra, Brungle & Tumut and Port Stephens. We recognised that most of the books are located in coastal areas, so we decided that it was important to include the books from the far west: Bourke, and Walgett & Collarenebri. We also had the opportunity to attend the Eurobodalla book launch and, with the permission of the participants, we now include it in this evaluation as an example of how Aboriginal communities take ownership of their books in the Heritage Series.

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3 [www.environment.nsw.gov.au](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au) then go to 'Culture and Heritage' tab and select

4 Gavin Andrews is the Manager of the Cultural Programs and Support Section in the Community and Operations Branch of the Country, Culture and Heritage Division of DECCW.

5 See for example, Fay Lyman’s public rejection of an interpretation of her oral history which was recorded by the Many Voices Aboriginal History program and housed at the National Library of Australia. [http://www.abe.net.au/news/stories/2008/02/16/2164527/?site=indigenous&topic=latest](http://www.abe.net.au/news/stories/2008/02/16/2164527/?site=indigenous&topic=latest)

6 Pamela Young is the research collaborator for this project and joint author of this book alongside Berenice Carrington. For information about the background of Pamela, Kath and Berenice see appendix 2.

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Above: Gavin Andrews at his desk.
Chapter 1: A case in point

Launching Aboriginal Men & Women's Heritage: Eurobodalla
A case in point

Launching Aboriginal Men & Women’s Heritage: Eurobodalla

Berenice Carrington

In 2008, on a Saturday morning in Moruya, a new book is being launched, *Aboriginal Men & Women’s Heritage: Eurobodalla*. Kath Schilling steps towards a microphone and begins speaking:

*Good morning everyone. I too would like to acknowledge that I am on traditional Country and would like to acknowledge the Elders that are here. I want to also say how wonderful it is to have this publication because it is your history and tells of your ancestors’ past through your photographs and the stories. You know what this is? It’s a legacy and it has been a real honour to know all these people through your stories. When we look at the photos and read their stories we are thinking about your ancestors and that is such a wonderful thing to do and… I thank you so much for being one part of a whole series of books that have went before.*

The Eurobodalla book is the twelfth publication in a series of books that record the lives of Aboriginal women and men living in New South Wales. The books are a written record of the spoken memories of mostly elderly Aboriginal people. Each book is located in a specific place, some are based in the towns such as Nambucca, Wagga Wagga, Nowra, Bourke, Walgett and Collarenebri, and the regional city of Wollongong, others refer to a special place like Cabbage Tree Island near Ballina or the mission at Brungle near Tumut, and some are situated in a geographical region, like Eurobodalla, Port Stephens and Nepean.

Each heritage book follows the same format: the books look like a photo album, with spiral binding on one side and thick paper for the pages. A map or an aerial photograph shows the location for the book and nearby places of importance to the story-tellers. Inside, each person tells their story and illustrates it with family photographs. Additional photographs highlight things that people have mentioned in their stories, like a good fishing spot on the river, or bush tucker. These photographs were taken while the stories were being recorded.
Our present book describes the results of an evaluation of DECCW’s role in the publication of the Heritage books and records the feedback from women and men who participated in the series. Kath Schilling, the speaker at the Eurobodalla book launch, initiated the Heritage Series during her time as DECCW’s Aboriginal Women’s Heritage Coordinator. The heritage books have been very popular with Aboriginal communities. After the publication of the first book, Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nambucca in 2003, Aboriginal people started to approach DECCW and ask for assistance to do their own Heritage books.

This popularity took DECCW by surprise, because the original project was to only do two books, the first one on Nambucca and the second on Nowra. Another positive feature of the Heritage Series has been how they evolved, with each community putting their distinctive stamp on the series, for example, by adding poetry, focusing on a special place, or including men in the books (originally they were part of an Aboriginal women’s heritage project).

The way the books have been produced has also changed over time. The first few were produced with a lot of input from Kath Schilling, then the DECCW Aboriginal Conservation Officers took the process on and Kath’s role changed to become an advisor and editor. The Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officers began working in partnership with Aboriginal organisations in their regions and this resulted in the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service taking on the role of co-producer with DECCW for two books; one on Aboriginal women’s heritage and one on Aboriginal men’s heritage, both books being situated in Walgett and Collarenebri.

This collaboration between DECCW and the Medical Service made the valuable step of foregrounding the link between life story-telling and health. The funding for the book also expanded, due to the successful application the Medical Service made to the NSW Heritage Office. A further innovation to come out of this partnership was to tie in the launch of these two books with the twenty-year anniversary celebrations of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service.

The Eurobodalla Heritage book takes the progress of the series to a new level of significance, as the publication is the result of collaboration between local and state government. It was the initiative of the Eurobodalla Shire Council and was funded jointly by the Shire Council, the Natural Heritage Trust, the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority and DECCW. DECCW’s contribution also included Kath Schilling’s assistance with the production and editing of the book.

The Eurobodalla book came out of a three year Aboriginal heritage study that the Shire Council had carried out. Although members of the Shire’s Aboriginal Heritage Steering Committee were really pleased with the results of the heritage study, they wanted to present some of the information in a different way. They wanted to highlight the family stories that were told in the Eurobodalla Aboriginal heritage study. The Committee nominated the DECCW Heritage Series as a model for the way that family history could be presented in its own right as Aboriginal heritage.

Susan Donaldson, the anthropologist who compiled the heritage study, knew of the DECCW Heritage books and asked Kath to lift the family histories from the study and present them in the style of the Heritage Series. Susan followed through by visiting each of the Aboriginal contributors for additional information and photos.

At the Eurobodalla book launch, two members of the community who had been involved in the decision to develop the Eurobodalla book, spoke about what the book means to them. Their comments are quoted below:

**Trish Ellis**

I’m really proud to be a part of it. I’m involved in the Eurobodalla Advisory Committee and I’ve been involved with the Heritage Committee since it started. I’ve been one of the people who have been only one of not a pusher or shover, but one of the people who’ve been trying to get a lot more happening with the Shire Council in relation to our people to record our stuff, so that it is there. I think it’s great… we haven’t got their life stories, but we’ve got pages out of their lives, and I think that makes a really big difference to people who have never met them in person, but sooner or later will find out that they are related to them and I love that. I really love that people can connect in that way.

**Iris White**

I’m a proud Yuin woman and for me to have this book produced is something really special. The Southern Rivers CMA [Catchment Management Authority] is always very proud to support Aboriginal projects through the engagement of working with Aboriginal people and connecting Aboriginal people to Country. I think our role and DECCW’s with the Eurobodalla Aboriginal Heritage project has been one of our successful projects.

But I’d like to go and say a couple of other things that aren’t in my capacity as a member of the Board of the Southern Rivers CMA. And that is… I’d like to acknowledge the people who contributed and told their valuable stories, those people who participated and whose stories are recorded there. I’m very, very proud of those stories and of those links that we have with this really magnificent Country of ours.

And I want to make special mention of Uncle Alec. Uncle Alec is my mother’s oldest brother. He was the eldest of three brothers as well as my mum and her younger sister Auntie Regina. And Uncle Alec passed away throughout the recording of the book. His wife, Auntie Harriet Walker’s story is captured here today so I pay my respects to Auntie Harriet, and also his eldest daughter Maria.

Uncle Alec was a very gentle man and he was father to a whole lot of people. I want to make special mention of Uncle Alec because he’s the last patriarch in my family and whilst his story is not captured there, he is the last Walker. He’s the last man in my family to carry that name. It’s very important to me that while his story is not captured in that book, I know that throughout the process of the interviews some of his stories were told and are recorded. And that’s what’s really important about this, the stories whether published or not, they are
There is agreement between these different generations of the community about family history as heritage. Trish and Iris are the generation below Margaret, Mary and Pamela. While Trish and Iris are proud to receive family history from their Elders, Margaret, Mary and Pamela all express a sense of fulfilment at having passed on something of their lives to their children. However, for these three older women their access to the past and their role in transferring knowledge to the next generations has not been straightforward. The need for caution is a theme in Mary’s comments.

These three women are aged 65 and older and they would have had direct experience of government control of their lives. Mary’s caution reflects the respect that she has for the careful ways in which her Elders handled information. Pamela in a different way refers to a similar situation; her Elders ‘never spoke much about the past’. And Margaret, although she doesn’t say it outright, the silences of the generation before hers are suggested by her commenting that she is glad that she ‘did it’ so that her children will know something of who they are.

There is agreement between these different generations of the community about family history as heritage. Trish and Iris are the generation below Margaret, Mary and Pamela. While Trish and Iris are proud to receive family history from their Elders, Margaret, Mary and Pamela all express a sense of fulfilment at having passed on something of their lives to their children. However, for these three older women their access to the past and their role in transferring knowledge to the next generations has not been straightforward. The need for caution is a theme in Mary’s comments.

These three women are aged 65 and older and they would have had direct experience of government control of their lives. Mary’s caution reflects the respect that she has for the careful ways in which her Elders handled information. Pamela in a different way refers to a similar situation; her Elders ‘never spoke much about the past’. And Margaret, although she doesn’t say it outright, the silences of the generation before hers are suggested by her commenting that she is glad that she ‘did it’ so that her children will know something of who they are.
While most non-Aboriginal families have some glossed-over parts of their family history or silences around certain experiences – for example, active service during wartime, or babies born outside of marriage – the decision to tell or not to tell usually lies with the family’s members. This is very different to feeling, as many Aboriginal people have, that you should not tell anything to your children, that may put them in a compromising position in relation to the authorities. This reflects a history of cautiousness by Aboriginal people which they have developed in response to their experiences of various government interventions.

To have been the subject of government policies from the 1940s to the 1970s that were based on racial discrimination, particularly when that government still had the view that Australia was ‘Terra Nullius’ (nobody’s land) before it came under the control of the British Crown, confronted those generations of Aboriginal people with hard choices. I make this comment by way of giving a context to the feelings shared with us by Trish, Iris, Mary and Pamela, and also as a perspective with which to understand some of the difficulties that Aboriginal people confront when they record and publish their heritage.

Trish Ellis in her speech during the formal proceedings chose to address some of these issues:

One of the things that always amazes me – it doesn’t matter what capacity I’m working in – there will be some people or families that will say, ‘when you’re in my community you talk to me, when you are in that community you talk to that person’, or in the next community, ‘you talk to such and such’. One of the rules I’ve had a lot of joy in breaking is that one.

I really love that those books are out and that they cover a lot of different families and in doing that they are making sure that – we can’t cover everybody, it’s impossible to cover everybody – but the thing that is so amazing about it is, that there are a lot of families that are getting covered and people who say, ‘you come and talk to me’, are being exclusive of other Aboriginal people. And what I love about this is, it’s inclusive of everybody, because what makes an Aboriginal community is the entire Aboriginal people who live in it.

Later, after the proceedings, Trish also added this comment:

Auntie Marg, who’s my mum’s younger sister, she talked about Nan, and I talked about my mum because I’m the oldest in my family and it’s important that every family has the opportunity to talk, not just one person representing a whole group of families. Everyone’s got different memories of how things happened and some of the people tend to make it up if they don’t know it and that’s silly.

The way Aboriginal communities work, is we all know bits and pieces. Until all the bits and pieces are put back together again, the jigsaw is not complete. I’ve always been a strong advocate for, I won’t ever be told, ‘only talk to this one, only talk to that one’. I go and talk to everybody because everybody has the right to be heard, absolutely everybody.

Trish raises the question of who is entitled to speak about the past. She reveals how these political approaches can limit the quality of information, because of the desires of a few to become the sole authorities on the history of the community.

Trish’s description of knowledge being held in ‘bits and pieces’ and of this being the way in which ‘Aboriginal communities work’ is not so much, I believe, about a chaotic sort of patchwork of surviving fragments of knowledge, as about a practice of securing important information by distributing it in segments across family and community members; thereby increasing the likelihood that the information would survive the loss of any individual knowledge holder.

Taken all together, Trish’s comments about the value she places on inclusiveness, the need for every family member to have the opportunity to talk about what they know and the way in which knowledge is held in communities, might be understood as part of her vision of a successful oral history project. But they are not in-built to the process of community oral history projects. Instead, they are outcomes achieved for the oral history project by the people who act as drivers for the project. In the conversation that followed the speeches, Trish made a point of acknowledging the hard work done by others to bring the book to fruition:

There’s a core of people who are doing lots and lots of stuff – we get attacked from all different quarters, but there’s this core of people who think it’s important that this type of stuff keeps happening and who keep plodding along trying to do the right thing by the community. In that I’d like to acknowledge Anita Brunhuber, she’s done a brilliant job; Deb Lenson gets attacked quite a lot because she’s not an Aboriginal...
woman but she’s got her heart in the right place. She does a really, really good job. Susan Donaldson works in lots of different avenues in Aboriginal affairs – because she’s an anthropologist as well – but she works with a lot of different Aboriginal communities and I’ve never met a nicer person than those three women.

Christine Leigh is the Chairperson: she’s been the main pusher and shover. I’ve probably missed somebody – you know. Iris White is one of those silent achievers, she doesn’t ever expect to be acknowledged for what she does, but she’s always behind little bits of funding going here and there that makes things run a little better. They never get acknowledged for what they do.

Iris White, like Trish, also used her speech during the book launch to address an issue that had come up during the process of making the book:

I’d also just like to raise something that came up once just after the Advisory Committee meeting. . . . some of the people who contributed their stories, have told stories that sometimes relate to the same event in our community, and some of the people who had seen some of those stories made comments and said, ‘that’s not actually right, this is what happened’.

But what I’d like to say in relation to that, is that the stories are the stories of the people who wrote them and who contributed to them. There’s no wrong and there’s no right in that. It is our account of those people who’ve contributed accounts to that process, not only with the book but in some of the other stories that have been captured as part of the [Heritage] Study. And that’s really what our game here is really about, it’s about how we relate and how we interpret our stories and how we interpret them back to others. So I really wanted to make the point that there’s no wrong and right in that. It’s just our stories.

Iris points out the important contribution that the book makes to how members of the community can relate to each other and interpret each other’s stories about the past. Iris’s view is shared by one of the members of the audience at the book launch, Margaret Cruse came to the launch to represent her sister, Linda Cruse:

I really like these things . . . it’s interesting. You can talk about these things, because it does make you feel good.

For Margaret the book launch has created an opportunity for her to participate in something that is important to her, because although Margaret did not record her story for the book, it describes a world that she knew. So that while some members of the community may wish for a single authoritative account of past events (as Iris has described above), other members of the community, like Margaret, enjoy the opportunity to explore the past with others. As the past becomes accessible, Vivienne Mason’s nieces and nephews felt encouraged to begin to research their family tree:

It was a good opportunity to let people know where we are from. What happened in the past: my nieces and nephews are aware of their heritage and are keen to do more research and want me to help on our family tree. I have had great responses from family and friends and community. Being well known, people and family members want a copy of the book. I’m the eldest in the family. Yes I’m very happy.

Anita Brunhuber, (one of the drivers for the project who is acknowledged by Trish Ellis) also saw the book launch as an important part of the process of creating links between community members and between the present and the past:

The young crowd here today really sums it up for me. When I look through the book it makes me so proud that they are coming forward and sharing their stories. It’s only going to make things better for everyone to come forward and tell their stories.

The Eurobodalla book has also become a way to inform non-Aboriginal branches of Aboriginal families of the history of their Aboriginal relatives. Anita Brunhuber spoke to us about one example:

When I contacted one of them (her story is in the book), she said, can she have extra copies to forward on to her relatives in Queensland? Because they don’t know much about the Aboriginal side of the family.

One woman who spoke to us anonymously found that the book gave her the opportunity to reveal herself to her community:

It wasn’t all told in my story. I’ll tell you something about this book. This book has opened a lot of people’s eyes. A lot of people didn’t know who I am because of my mum. Now they know me.

The same woman also talked to us about how her story is still incomplete:

There’s one person I didn’t even mention in the book. I’d like to know where my father’s family is from. That is one thing that I would love to find out. I’d love to find out my father’s people before I pass away.

One of the things that participants in the Heritage Series books anticipate is that by publishing their stories, they will be able to be traced by family members who have been separated from their heritage either as a consequence of past government policies or for other reasons. Trish Ellis spoke to us about how the Heritage Series books help relatives to find each other, and how in this successful searching they find something of their heritage within themselves:

There is one other thing that I might say. You know how they have that philosophy of nine degrees of separation: that once you get to the ninth person they will know somebody that the first person knew. With Aboriginal people it’s only two degrees. You only have to talk to an Aboriginal person to know where they come from and who they are related to. We are only separated by two degrees and that’s what’s important. That’s what’s kept us surviving as long as we have, because even if you are not part of that structure and you’re not brought up in your family unit and you’ve been separated, there’s still that connection, because you feel it.

Kath Schilling also spoke about how people often ring her to tell her that they have discovered a relative through one of the Heritage books. She told one story as an example:

Pamela Young, over there taking photos madly, you know she never knew her grandparents on her father’s side. But when she was doing the Brungle & Tumut publication follow-up with Berenice Carrington, she found people who knew them and had photos of them in the Brungle & Tumut publication.

So Pam and Berenice had followed up on the publication and went to Tumut and Brungle. The community asked, ‘Who are you?’ and Pamela told them she was a Tighe from Moree and her father was a Carroll. So they told Pamela her grandmother was in the book.

Even though the process of recording, publishing and launching the Eurobodalla book was complex and apparently (from Trish and Iris’s speeches), not without a few moments of community tension, overall the experience was a positive one for the community. The Eurobodalla book launch shows us the extensive
capacity of this Aboriginal community to conceive of, and to manage its family histories as living heritage. This considerable capacity was evident in all of the communities that we visited during our evaluation of the Aboriginal Heritage Series.

The Eurobodalla Aboriginal community take ownership of and are able to create a highly accessible and portable representation of their affiliations in their Heritage Series book. This can be attributed to the creation of opportunities for members of the community to articulate shared points of view. The few pages out of each Elder’s life (as Trish described them) serve as an introduction and a link between people rather than as complete life histories. This results in an emphasis on family histories as living heritage, because each story in the book is only part of a larger picture; a picture which can only be completed in real life by all of the people who either know that person or who are related to them. In this way the books do not displace the importance of oral tradition to members of the community.

The commitment by so many members of the community to make the book happen (the book launch was packed out) created an opportunity for people to participate in a collective activity. And working together enabled members of the community to discover where there was general agreement between members and where there were differences of opinion about the past.

Importantly, participants in the project used the book launch to offer a way of reconciling differing views of the past, by talking about the social value of inclusiveness and by acknowledging that any event is recalled from multiple perspectives. This last idea conveys the sense that the past does not require consistency in peoples’ memory for it to have existed. This idea promotes the desirability of freedom to explore the past.

The speeches and interviews that we recorded at the Eurobodalla book launch show the depth of understanding that participants have about the meaning of these books for their community. The publication of the stories of Aboriginal Elders as a stand-alone feature of the general Eurobodalla Shire Aboriginal heritage study demonstrates respect for the ways in which the community wishes to maintain oral histories by their Elders. The hope is that these life stories will be respected as knowledge that can be passed on to younger generations and shared with extended family and the wider community.

The Heritage Series book acknowledges the potential of every single member of the community to know something of value about their heritage and to promote respect for that individual knowledge as evidence of a living culture and heritage. It demonstrates the capacity of the community to be aware that in the stories of their Elders there are different perspectives of the same events and that this is acceptable. This enhances the importance of the role of the stories to the community, because they articulate the social value of inclusiveness and are the result of the courage shown by the Elders to tell their stories, often overcoming a long-standing distrust of making information about themselves or their families public.

The appreciation shown by members of the community attending the book launch for the positive experience that they have gained from participating in the event and the lasting benefit of having access to the Heritage book reinforces these values. The result is a willingness of community members to see the opportunity to record oral history as a freedom that they have achieved for themselves and which they have established for future generations. There is recognition that there are more stories to come, from people who did not participate in the first round of oral history recording, and from people who will discover their connections to the Aboriginal communities of Eurobodalla as a consequence of reading the Eurobodalla book.

This detailed account of the Eurobodalla book launch shows us how people feel about family history and what is important to them about this particular form of heritage. The main themes, above, from the speeches and from the conversations that we had with people at the book launch indicate that family history is understood by this community to be a significant part of its heritage.

The Eurobodalla community’s engagement with family history as heritage demonstrates several shared points of view where all relationships or potential relationships between Aboriginal people are respected. From our analysis of the occasion of the book launch it is clear that these Aboriginal people feel that their society should be accessible to Aboriginal people at all times on the basis of having a structural place within it, or because of a desire to fulfill an affiliation (no matter how recently that affiliation has been discovered). For example Trish Ellis’s comment that Aboriginal people only have two degrees of separation between each other and that these are connections that do not necessarily have to be based on participation, they can also be based on feeling.

The living heritage of family and the stories of the Elders are the foundation of contemporary cultural heritage. The role of historical heritage is to demonstrate attachment to things such as elements of settler culture that earlier Aboriginal generations have adopted. For example, Iris White’s reference to her Uncle Alec Walker as the last patriarch or bearer of that name. The Heritage Series demonstrates the desirability of freedom of expression about the past and asserts social values (such as inclusiveness and respect) as a valid feature of community directed projects.

7 All comments from the Eurobodalla book launch are either from recordings of the speeches or from interviews conducted and recorded by Pamela Young after the formal proceedings and transcribed by Berenice Carrington.

8 During the last half of the nineteenth century and the first two thirds of the twentieth century, successive Australian governments sought in various ways to control the lives and conduct of Aboriginal peoples. A consistent theme in the government policies was the perception that Aboriginal cultures were subordinate to the cultures of the settler society and that Aboriginal people should be either allocated and accept functions and identities in the settler society or be quarantined from it. A particularly damaging policy, which continued until the 1970s, involved offering incentives to Aboriginal adults to relinquish their culture and social/familial relationships and systematically training children who had been removed from their parents to assume new identities and to reject their cultures of origin. State and Federal governments in Australia have subsequently acknowledged the harmful impacts of these historic policies. In 1997, the NSW State Parliament issued a formal apology to Aboriginal people who had been affected by the policies of forced removal from their families. The Stolen Generation and continued policy initiatives to address disparities between Aboriginal people and the rest of the population regarding health, education, employment, economic development housing and cultural heritage. In 2008, the Prime Minster, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the ‘Stolen Generation’ and committed the Federal Government to a range of policies aimed at decreasing the gap between the average life expectancy of Aboriginal people and the rest of Australia’s population. For more information about the above visit www.parliament.nsw.gov.au; www.aph.gov.au; and www.reconciliation.org.au.

9 My interpretation is based on descriptions of this type of distribution of knowledge shared with me by Gavin Andrews during a conversation.

10 Pamela Young discusses the story of discovering her relatives in more detail in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2: Our Way

Aboriginal values and beliefs in the context of government
Kath Schilling and the late Ray Kelly conducted research in Aboriginal communities on behalf of government in identified Aboriginal roles where the first essential criteria for the position is Aboriginality. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the ways in which Kath and Ray Kelly were able to work within and between different sets of values and beliefs. Those of government, those of the Aboriginal communities that they worked with and their own personal values. I refer to Ray Kelly by his full name out of respect for him as an Aboriginal elder who has passed on.

My analysis brings Kath and Ray Kelly together as producers of work which continues to be of significance to Aboriginal communities. A motivation that they have had in common is the belief that government has a responsibility to engage with the cultural lives and lived heritage of Aboriginal communities. Of central concern to each of their research approaches has been a demonstrated commitment to the social agendas of the communities with which they worked. It is important to note that neither of them focused on theoretical questions of methodology. For them, the mark of good research could be seen in what you do rather than what you theorise. From this perspective, the role of government research is to create ways to work within a cultural context that benefits communities.

Ray Kelly was one of the founding members of the Aboriginal sites of significance survey team in the 1970s. Kath initiated the Heritage Series which is the subject of this book. The quotes and references to Kath in this chapter have been compiled through the reproduction of conversations that I have had with her. When I joined the research team four years ago, Kath was working on the Aboriginal Women’s Fishing project and I was beginning the Wellbeing Research Project. As a new team member, Kath generously mentored my initial contacts with Aboriginal communities, inviting me to assist her on several field trips. Since Kath took on her managerial role, we have had a series of discussions about her approach to her research and in particular the coordination of the production of the Heritage Series.

The analysis of Ray Kelly’s work relies mainly on his recorded thoughts on Aboriginal heritage and cultural renewal. I was also fortunate enough to meet Ray Kelly in 2003 at one of DECCW’s Culture and Heritage Division’s annual forums where he was a keynote speaker. Ray Kelly spoke about the complex nature of the roles for Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal communities in the government context. This was one of the starting points for my growing interest in the approaches taken by Aboriginal people to culture and heritage research.

In their research, both Kath and Ray Kelly sustained a commitment to the social agendas of the Aboriginal communities that they collaborated with. Both researchers position themselves as educators of the Department that employed them and as resource people for the communities that they worked with. I discuss how this level of participation with communities gives an ethical basis to their research. I also consider how their involvement with the emotional aspects of how people feel about their culture and heritage, including their own, has played an important part in the success of their research.

In terms of the success of both Kath’s and Ray Kelly’s research, an understanding of Aboriginal community social agendas has been essential. Truth-making processes also figure strongly in their research approaches. Challenging inaccurate and damaging information about Aboriginal people in New South Wales is an imperative that Kath and Ray Kelly both elected to incorporate in their research. Another important outcome for them both has been the creation of increased opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in their own social and cultural worlds as well as those of wider society and for this participation to be respected. Notably, both their approaches have included the intention to lay the foundations for long-term productive relationships between Aboriginal communities and DECCW.

Aboriginal people doing Aboriginal research with Aboriginal communities

Ray Kelly and Kath located themselves as participants in the social and cultural worlds of the Aboriginal communities that they worked with. Choosing to locate their professional roles in the social worlds of the Aboriginal communities enabled Ray Kelly and Kath to participate in the cultural autonomy of these communities. It is an autonomy that Aboriginal people could assert through their connections to each other, to Country, to oral traditions and to shared histories. In particular, this participation provided Ray Kelly and Kath with an ethical context for their work that was grounded in the communities’ values and belief systems. This made them active participants in the communities with which they worked, as distinct from external theorists or technicians of Aboriginal culture and heritage conservation.

Their involvement in the social world of the communities that they worked with provided them with deep understandings of the feelings in each community about heritage. I believe that examining this participation in more detail will illustrate not only their understandings of Aboriginal culture and heritage but also some of the factors that contributed to the success of their projects.

Concern for the truth is a key principle for Kath in her work:

There are issues about what has been written in the past and then taken as truth. What has been written in history and in the interpretations of the early observations of the colonists? We must respect that the people we work with are responsible for the truth in their area but we are responsible for the accuracy of the information we report on as truth. (21/5/08).

One of the things our Department needs to understand is what you do with a piece of knowledge. If you go out into a community you need background information. If you are not armed with the full story it can perpetuate a historical myth; words with no depth. Unless we do background research then the truth of our heritage will be one sided. Believe me, truth has a ring to it, story inventions are just words. Accuracy, or truth can be felt. We must have the competence within government to say and know the truth of heritage or history, whatever is the situation. We have to deal with truth. If we are confident, as government, they [the Aboriginal community] can be confident with us. (12/2/08)

…once they knew her story, they had to acknowledge her… once her story was written down.

Kath Schilling
Kath specifies a particular role for government departments, which is to tell the truth and interpret the past and to counter myths engendered by some of the early colonists who recorded their own particular observations and theories about Australia’s Indigenous peoples. Significantly, Kath identifies DECCW’s capacity to interpret the truth as an indicator of its competence.

The truth that Kath speaks of is two fold, it is accurate and verifiable information, and it is the feelings and experiences of the story-teller. For example Kath tells a story about the positive impact on one woman of recording her story:

She told me: “My grandchildren think I’m stupid because I haven’t got education’. She’d worked in the paddocks picking beans, watching the kid in the pram for snakes. Her grandchildren didn’t believe what she had achieved and they wouldn’t listen to her. But once they knew her story they wanted to acknowledge her… once her story was written down (21/05/08).

In this account the woman’s life, once it has been recorded, became educational for her grandchildren.

In terms of truth, Ray Kelly aspired to an authentic basis to Aboriginal life that would be founded in Aboriginal history:

So far as I am concerned, I think we should try to establish a history for our people: we have needed a history all of these 200 years since Cook arrived. The meaning of our history is particular in that what we have to go through is a phase of re-establishing our idea of our own humanity in our own eyes, after the damage done to us by white beliefs about us. It is not that things have to be proven against whites so much as proven about our own humanity (Kijas 2005:14).

The truth that Ray Kelly speaks of, concerns the development of clear and unfettered ways for Aboriginal people to see each other as human beings who share a common history. He envisaged that this history would be a vital plank in a platform on which Aboriginal people would build their contemporary culture. Truthfulness, accuracy and veracity are the corner stones of both their practices.

The truth has a ring to it, invention is just words

Kath and Ray Kelly have both been confronted in their work by the need to distinguish between information concerning Aboriginal people that is valued by and useful to Aboriginal communities – the information that contributes to their cultural autonomy - and that which does not. Their responses have involved challenging inaccuracies in certain written observations of Aboriginal culture that were recorded by early colonists and historians. Their work has also involved differentiating between Aboriginal oral testimony that can be shared, and that which is private or not appropriate for a general readership.

As we saw in the previous chapter where Aboriginal staff talked about wellbeing, public exposure to positive representations of contemporary Aboriginal heritage is still limited. Kath’s intention for the Heritage Series has been to offer people the freedom to represent themselves through their life story and for those lives to be known to have been lived in real places.

Each book in the Heritage Series is named after a particular place that exists in the contemporary geography of New South Wales. They are not involved in projects associated with the traditional knowledge of people who have custodial responsibilities for Country. They are concerned with Aboriginal heritage of the recent past. The process of determining what stories are going to be told and who will tell them has been a significant part of the production of each book. The participants in each community have had debates with each other and with Kath about what sort of heritage will be recorded and who should record their life story.

The limited public profile of contemporary Aboriginal heritage meant that the Heritage Series contributed to the participant’s claims to the past and future of their communities. However, people in each community insisted that the publications did not contain information of cultural significance that was not for public knowledge. Further, in communities where Native Title claims were in progress, the communities were concerned with making sure that the books would not impinge on the claim process. Whether or not someone has directly participated in the book, as each book is situated within the larger community, the value and content of the book may be important to all members of the community.

In discussions that I have had with Kath she has referred to the responsibility of communities for the truth of their information. In this sense Kath is careful to exclude government from the role of evaluating the truth of community information. Kath has also talked about the need for government to exercise respect towards the communities’ responsibility for their own truth. The implication being that the community would have its own principles for determining and monitoring its truths. The competence of the government in this case is its capacity to understand each community’s cultural autonomy.

If cultural autonomy is the foundation for the truth making processes of community, can someone who sets themselves apart from other Aboriginal people assert the truth of something on behalf of other Aboriginal people? It would seem that such an individual could only do so, if what they asserted was also asserted by, or endorsed by, a community. The collective is the authority which governs the cultural autonomy of an Aboriginal community. Therefore, when Ray Kelly and Kath located their roles as researchers within the social world of Aboriginal communities they were acknowledging and participating in the cultural autonomy of those communities where truth emerged from consensus.

Telling it like it is

Kath has been conscious in her oral history recording to ‘give a voice to people, people always say ‘my story’; you see my name is just tucked away on the back cover. It was always their story’. As a participant in Aboriginal cultural autonomy, Kath regards it as the prerogative of the person who has told the story to subsequently elect to nominate their oral history as a resource for other purposes, such as landscape or ecological surveys:

I believe that the big issues in the next five years will be the mis-use of information and the erosion of human rights (21/5/08).

By recording the story and publishing it within the context of a Heritage Series, Kath contributes to the cultural maintenance of that community: the transmission of cultural information occurs between members of the community and from Elders to younger generations. It is a form of cultural transmission that is unfettered by any external agenda. In this sense, the books confirm or make public the cultural autonomy of the story-tellers and of their communities also.
Kath approached the oral history recording sessions with community as an opportunity for people to tell their story. The stories are therefore true in the sense that they are accurate representations of what each person has experienced in living their life.

How do you weigh things up if the experts don’t agree with the testimony of your ancestors? The experts had everything to gain and your ancestors had nothing to lose (12/2/08).

In this sense Kath’s approach references emotional intelligence. The ‘truth’ in DECCW’s role in this activity is concerned with offering and sustaining an open space for the story-teller to claim and use. Kath outlined these principles in a conversation (25/7/08):

They [Aboriginal story-tellers] are responsible for each of their pages in the book. We just provide the ‘vehicle’ for people to tell their own stories – the representation of themselves, the photographs – it’s their responsibility. We just give people the blank pages. It’s their story, their pages to do whatever they want with them. We don’t judge what people want to put in there – we are not going to say ‘hang on for a minute, that’s not right’. And any type of questioning, I would not have encouraged people to tell something that is a likely embarrassment or is no one else’s business.

Kath assumes specific responsibilities for her contribution to the truth making process of oral history recording:

I actually do a lot of things around the edges. I don’t leave a lot of things to chance. I’ve also come with lots of material and information. Things I’ve come to know about. And it’s all the follow through. I don’t think I’ve been lucky. Research has been thought out and planned. And it’s been a lot of contact with the guys [Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officers]. And I don’t like any sort of negativity to take over a project because that can bog you down. (22/7/08)

The responsibilities that Kath describes herself as having are indicative of the competence that she regards as necessary for DECCW to fulfil its role in the truth making process.

Trust me, I’m from the Government!

Kath is considerate of the commitment that some Aboriginal people have to resist any form of government intervention in their lives:

If people don’t want to be involved that’s their right – their right – you have to take your leads from that community. If they want to be involved, they’ll pick it up and run with it. You have to be able to sell your outcome and people to have to believe you will deliver. (8/8/08)

A principle of Kath’s research has been to always say, ‘Trust me, I’m from the government!’ Her ironic ending to the way she introduces herself to Aboriginal communities acknowledging any negative experiences people may have had in their dealings with government:

I always saw the research as building bridges, repairing relations, reigniting the potential for an ongoing relationship with DECCW. The stories are an open door for further work. I never saw the stories as definitive or final. (22/5/08)

These two statements are further examples of how Kath’s approach to her research engages with the cultural autonomy of Aboriginal communities. The combination of respecting resistance to outside intervention in community affairs and by setting herself the goal of creating future opportunities or ‘building bridges’ integrates the agency of the community with the process of recording oral testimony and makes those processes transparent to governance by the community. Importantly, people who have refused to participate still figure in Kath’s research, as stakeholders who are ‘non-participants’:

I have had to respond to accusations from non-participants in the books that I’m taking knowledge away – but I am justified collecting knowledge by stating that I am listening to stories and information and giving it back, not only to the informant but to a larger community audience, at the request of the informant. (21/5/08)

Even though the story-tellers have agreed to participate, other members of the community who have elected not to participate, still act to protect the interests of the community in the oral testimony. The idea that knowledge can be taken away also serves to confirm that Kath has engaged with oral testimony that is of value to the community. Kath’s reference to having had to respond to non-participants is illustrative of the ethical considerations to which she gains access by situating her research within the governance of the community. The nature of Kath’s participation in the community makes all of the members’ responses meaningful to the research. It is an inclusive approach, as opposed to an exclusive one, because non-participants are given the opportunity to be part of the project.

Another aspect of Kath’s participation in community cultural autonomy has been to situate people in real time and space:

Each book is located in a real place, not an imagined community. The concept of imagined communities peopled by place-based people weighs heavily in the government’s language, because they have taken an easy track to describe a difficulty. (21/5/08)

In this regard, Kath tackles head on the displacement and dislocation of many Aboriginal people in NSW from their traditional Country. Over two hundred years of colonisation in NSW has resulted in Aboriginal people being involved in an on going process to re-gain access to places of cultural, historical and heritage significance and being granted responsible roles in the management of those places of significance.

Kath’s statement about ‘imagined communities peopled by place-based people’ hints at the contradictory states of belonging experienced by Aboriginal community members following such processes as the hand back of national parks to traditional owners. The process of reconstructing a ‘whose who’ of a particular Country after more than a century and a half of dispossession seems to Kath to deny a fundamental aspect of contemporary Aboriginal culture in NSW: the belief in a shared Aboriginal history of NSW. Kath’s concern is driven by a commitment to Aboriginal cultural autonomy and a wariness of the potential for government agendas to overtake those of the communities. (Various conversations with Kath).
Giving back to community

The return of knowledge to communities is high on the list of priorities for Ray Kelly and for Kath. Between Ray Kelly’s time in DECCW (1973 – 1980s) and Kath’s (2001 – present) it has become policy to return information to communities and to respect Indigenous rights to intellectual and moral property. Whilst these matters of protocol and policy would have been of importance to Ray Kelly and to Kath, both of these Aboriginal researchers have been concerned with a larger sphere of ethics than those of a government department, they have situated themselves within community frames of governance as well. Ray Kelly and Kath have both spoken about the importance of Aboriginal governance to their work. By looking at how they practiced their roles as participants in the social worlds of Aboriginal communities we can gain an insight into the ethical context that this provided for their research.

Ray Kelly was concerned to play his part in recording what he called ‘living sites’, ‘in a face-to-face way before our resource people die’:

*What I want to see very desperately is for our people to have a chance to build a modern Aboriginal culture out of our tribal traditions (Kijas 2005: 14).*

Thus, Ray Kelly’s intention for the Sites of Significance Survey was to make accurate records of oral knowledge of traditional sites, so that contemporary Aboriginal people would have credible foundations on which to build their own social worlds. Such an outcome would produce modern Aboriginal culture:

*We, the true Australians, are regarded as beggars in our own country when it comes to culture and history, as well as everything else. I believe some of us have been unconsciously waiting for the opportunity to link our tribal culture with the western man’s culture, something whites didn’t think about. They were far too concerned with pressuring us into absorbing a culture which was destined to fail us. Now that some of us are aware of what we have lost, there seems to be an urgent need to restore whatever is left of our culture. To do this successfully we must involve many more Aborigines in the recording and protection program. I am sure the time is right now if we want to*
make the Survey a success for both Aborigines and whites. I am certain 1976 will be too late then all will be lost forever. (ibid)

The sense of urgency in Ray Kelly’s words is not limited to the need to record knowledge holders approaching the end of their lives: it was informed by what he perceived as the negative impacts on Aboriginal societies caused by not having this knowledge:

My fears are that if these sites are only recorded for academic values, and not protected for Aboriginal values, then again the Aboriginal values will be cast aside (ibid).

Ray Kelly was driven by his awareness of the importance to Aboriginal wellbeing of having access to living sites – sites that could be spoken for – places for which there was an oral tradition:

This involvement of our people is necessary in my way of seeing it because we have to learn again to have respect for ourselves as human beings after what has happened to us. We almost believe what whites believed about us. The Sacred Sites Survey and my own involvement with tribal men has had a very special meaning for me that I believe all of us need (Kijas 2005: 15).

While Ray Kelly’s work occurred within the context of a site recording project, a comprehensive social agenda underpinned the action that he took. The sites were significant because of the living knowledge holders who could communicate their meaning and, because of the potential benefit to Aboriginal cultural autonomy that access to sites which were enriched by a spoken tradition would create. It would seem from this that Ray Kelly regarded his role as one which must support a living culture and therefore one which would require his full participation.

Emphasising his affiliation to Aboriginal social worlds supported Ray Kelly’s view that Aboriginal knowledge was equal to, if not more important than many professional skills:

*There are two kinds of education – the English education and there’s knowledge. Knowledge is probably better than being able to manipulate a computer* (Kijas 2005: 16).

By positioning himself in an integrated way with community, Ray Kelly valued professionalism in terms of respecting the community’s ways rather than fulfilling traditional views of professionalism. Underpinning this approach is the understanding that participation and experiential knowledge are of equal value to theoretical knowledge and that the former is essential when working with aural cultures.

The ability to access sites makes a significant contribution to wellbeing, linked with the benefits of experiencing one’s culture as a living thing, as opposed to an artefact from a past accessed only through archaeology or some other scientific discipline. When community people interacted with Ray Kelly therefore, they experienced him as an Aboriginal man, who was serving their interests as a researcher. Ray Kelly’s campaign was to support and sustain an existing living cultural tradition, as well as to leave behind information that others could use in the future to reinstate cultural knowledge:

*I hope the information compiled in this report meets the needs of the Service and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and will later assist Aborigines in our endeavour to rebuild Aboriginal culture to its rightful place* (Kijas 2005: 25).

Ray Kelly’s research method was engaged with a concept of autonomy for Aboriginal people that would be achieved through increasing Aboriginal people’s social capacity to experience and participate in a precious living tradition while its speakers remained among them. Ray Kelly’s desire to see Aboriginal culture returned to ‘its rightful place’ suggests that he understood that power and culture were interdependent.

Approximately 30 years later, Kath’s work with Aboriginal communities required her to address similar issues to those that had concerned Ray Kelly. However, Kath describes her approach as one which began with a goal to record sites, but which evolved into life history recording:

*My impressions had changed from my original days with the Service, where I was influenced by the Sites of Significance Survey, and had instead turned towards life history. (The) first (priority) should be the people and then it should be the objects that are out there in the landscape. If I’d gone to people directly asking about sites, it would have been as if I were saying, ‘You’re not really the importance here, what I really want to know about is that object over there’. The project turned into creating awareness of Aboriginal women. So my idea was, that if Aboriginal women are important and have survived – then we should see them – and I could go back later, their stories would be [a] grounding to move into other things [like site recording]. Sites were about landscape as important, whereas my priority was the women and their lives. (8/8/08)*

Kath’s approach does not treat an oral history as a means to an end but as an end in itself. The oral histories were recorded for the Aboriginal communities in which they were located. She collected the oral histories on behalf of the women and men who elected to tell their family histories and have them published. In this process living heritage is given a material form and returned directly to its owners so that it can then be shared with others. Kath found that the ‘living site’ of significance, the person with knowledge, would be the determinant for what was important, as opposed to a list of archeologically interesting places or ecosystems to which one might wish to attach details of social significance.

In making a distinction between people as ‘sites’ of significance as opposed to heritage sites of significance in the landscape, Kath is not being critical of the Sites of Significance Survey, Kath’s position is in accord with that of Ray Kelly. In the same way that Ray Kelly resisted the subjugation of the cultural meaning of sites to those of science, Kath resists the subjugation of life histories to the science of landscape assessment.

Ray Kelly looked for information that communities could use to rebuild themselves as modern Aboriginal cultures, whereas Kath looked for ways in which people could tell their stories and in doing so create multiple eye witness accounts of particular episodes in the histories of a number of places:

*Why saddened here and not there? Landscape is about history and links to past people – you are hurt because of their hurts. When you move away from Aboriginality you move away from their hurts (12/2/08)*

**Truth as feelings and experiences**

In the previous section I discussed how Ray Kelly and Kath, through their roles as researchers, supported the integrity of Aboriginal communities as truth makers. In particular, I concentrated on the emphasis that they gave collective Aboriginal identities in order to provide a means of appreciating the forms of cultural production that they participated in. In this section I
discuss how these collective or shared identities contribute to the strength of Aboriginal communities and consequently how in turn this resilience sustained Ray Kelly and Kath in the very demanding practices that they committed themselves to as Aboriginal researchers in Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal people have maintained social connections to each other, which forms the basis of collective cultural identities. They are resilient cultural identities, because they survive periodic attempts by governments and others to assert their preferred models of social organisation, either from a positive or negative ideological ambition for Australia’s Indigenous Peoples. Kath, in her project proposal for the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage Series, refers to this social resilience as one of the conditions which informs her research:

> It is slowly being recognised that although non-Aboriginal culture has dominated, it has not completely supplanted Aboriginal culture and the process of attempting to dominate along with Aboriginal resistance has helped to form modern Aboriginal culture. It is becoming recognised that, even though it was hard for Aboriginal people to hold on to their long established beliefs and values from that subjugated position, many have done so. It is finally being recognised that Aboriginal heritage is still a living tradition in NSW but one that relies partly on stories that identify natural landscapes. (Cultural Heritage Strategic Research Program Project Proposals 2001 – 02)

Kath’s reference to a ‘modern Aboriginal culture’, as one which has been forged out of ‘resistance’ is illustrative of a heritage which is greater than the retention of a particular heritage of beliefs, values and stories about Country from the past. Heritage can be a ‘living tradition’ because it is able to sustain life. Heritage is not just the conservation of something from the past, but is a foundation for futures lived as Aboriginal people. The production of the Heritage Series thus provides a contemporary heritage that includes the present and the past for the future.

Ray Kelly’s approach was concerned with how Aboriginal oral tradition contains the keys to a better life and spiritual comfort:

> If we only receive the message of our culture through a book in academic words it will be meaningless to us: it will only be a western academic’s interpretation of our Aboriginal values in life; it won’t be what I wanted it to be or what I believe we Aboriginal people want it to be. I believe it can be a light for us. It can give us an understanding of knowing who we are and where we came from. Knowing this can give us a foundation for achieving things in life. (Kijas 2005:15)

Importantly, Ray Kelly nominates other Aboriginal people as the primary audience for knowledge collected from Aboriginal people. Wellbeing features as the outcome of the transmission of culture between Aboriginal people. For example, it gives a depth of meaning to identity, provides a productive foundation for life as well as ‘spiritual comfort’. Ray Kelly’s point is significant; that Aboriginal people contribute to each other’s wellbeing through the sharing of knowledge and that this communication is conducted unfettered by dominating or colonising cultures.

Kath had similar goals in mind when she planned the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage oral history project. Reproduced below is a selection of the original project objectives. To:

- create awareness of Aboriginal women as custodians of an important part of Aboriginal traditional knowledge;
- raise the profile of the unique historical experience of Aboriginal women in NSW;
- show Aboriginal heritage as a living tradition in NSW, and give recognition to women’s contribution to the group in traditional and contemporary society; and
- provide a set of narratives illustrating the particular role of Aboriginal women.

These objectives have proved to be powerful components of the Heritage Series. They have corresponded with the desires of the communities that Kath has worked with, for these things to happen:

> You have always got to ask the community how they want to do a project with you (21/5/08).

Kath has been a witness to the emotional side of telling a life story:

> In the interviews there were stories of pain and despair and injustice. There is the telling of the story and then there is the recording of the story. They are two distinct things. With one woman, I had to turn a tape off five times – and give her time – go and make a cup of tea. Time to ease the pain in her heart. (21/5/08)

The experience of being an Aboriginal person in Australia in recent history has exposed many people to treatment and attitudes that have caused them pain. Kath’s practice as an Aboriginal researcher involved recognising people’s pain and editing stories so that the story-teller could find comfort in their own words and the freedom to reflect on their past:

> When you are dealing with someone’s life it’s quite difficult mentally. It’s a holistic approach that’s needed because you are absorbing someone’s experience. (21/4/08)

An important intention of the Heritage Series for Kath is the fact that all the books emphasise the resilience of the story-tellers in each community:

> None of the stories are written with any negativity at all. People don’t want to be portrayed as victims. The people in the books demonstrate resilience and courage. They are about what the participants went through to establish themselves in the present day (Historically the government has always inferred there has to be a ‘problem’ when dealing with Aboriginal people). Where’s the pride in being portrayed this way?

We should not define Aboriginal people by what they supposedly don’t have; the problems that we face are not part of our identity. We need to separate a problem that exists from the person. For example, you can be heritage disadvantaged, or income disadvantaged, but our measure of identity can’t have us labelled as being the same as the problem. There are aspects of our circumstances that can be described as experiencing disadvantage, or being reduced in condition or wellbeing as a result of disadvantage. We can all take responsibility for addressing disadvantage in these separated terms, because how can anything change if the problem has been made intrinsic to an Aboriginal person? (21/5/08)
The modern Aboriginal culture that Kath engages with, is one in which people can locate themselves as a living contradiction to a negative stereotype. People may still experience reduced wellbeing as a consequence of various forms of disadvantage, but they are always a person of substance with the capacity for resilience afforded to them by their culture.

Kath believes that life histories, after publication in the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series, become living heritage through a process of acknowledgement. Moreover, as a consequence of publication, these are personal accounts of family histories that are becoming accessible to both the Aboriginal community and the wider community. Kath recognises that the act of reading the story means that you are giving time to the ancestors and this creates a bridge between generations of the same family and between people who share that past. The benefit to Aboriginal societies of this activity has implications for wellbeing, because the public acknowledgement and access created for these oral histories repositions Aboriginal families from the category of social problem to celebrated and social assets of the whole community.

Kath’s principle of acknowledging the resilience and courage of each story-teller resonates with Ray Kelly’s determination to create the opportunity for a spiritually rewarding life for all NSW Aboriginal people. Both researchers have been conscious of the potential for their work to impact on the lives of other Aboriginal people. In this regard they reflect a responsibility for truth that is shared with the community’s responsibility for its truths. Kath regards her social agenda for oral history as one in which barriers to autonomy are confronted:

“If you drop the idea of ‘problem’ from an Aboriginal person, it gives them the right to be resilient. It’s about taking steps to remove stigma: so people become whole in their own right.” (21/5/08)

Kath talks about her ability to conduct research being dependent on the community deciding to work with her:

“You have to consciously have the foundations clear about the fact that you are making a relationship between community and government. That is essential for ongoing ease of interaction. We always approach people who we trust, for example, you choose a solicitor to represent you because you are satisfied that they know what they are doing and you feel that you can communicate with them. It’s the same for your choice of doctor. The community approaches government services in the same way. You use the connections that work for you.” (21/5/08)

Building community confidence in government services is a two-part process from Kath’s perspective:

The Aboriginal community is conditioned to have limited interactions with government. We need to aim to focus on the achievements of Aboriginal staff to demonstrate how to use opportunities. We need to identify the blocks to Aboriginal participation. (25/11/06)

Kath worked hard to generate outcomes that would be valued by the community and by doing so she was able to demonstrate how the community could interact effectively with a government department. Building community participation in government as a way of providing opportunities, was also identified by Ray Kelly as critical for the success of the Sites of Significance Survey:

…we must find a way to involve Aboriginal people, and not cut them off whenever they want to participate. In fact, in my experience, active encouragement to participate is essential (Kijas 2005: 15).

Ray Kelly approached community in a low key way:

Well with Ray, he’d come around sometimes with shorts and no shoes on. He’d just plop down and have a feed with us in the camp – we were living in the camps then, not in the houses. That didn’t bother him. He didn’t turn up with a suit or with a book in his hand asking questions. He sat down, had a cup of tea or something. So the people accepted him more readily than they did the others. He didn’t jump straight in with the tape recorder, the camera or the notebook. He just wanted to know the people. Now what’s going on here. I think by the end of that fifth or sixth visit here – when he used to come here he was staying for a week at a time you know – I think there wasn’t much held back then. (Ted Fields, on Ray Kelly; Kijas 2005: 59)

By limiting the impact of his participation in community life, Ray Kelly was seen by the community as respectful and therefore worthy of their acceptance.

Ray Kelly was conscious of the need to rebuild confidence in the research process. His description of building a relationship with the Elders on the mid-north and far north coast of NSW illustrates his approach:

Because they have been misled by false promises in the past, we felt we would have to give them a short-term result in the way of feedback and protection. Luckily our strategy worked, and then they began to participate in a trusting way. (Kijas 2005: 14)

Fencing the Bellbrook Mission cemetery is one example of the ‘short-term’ results that Ray Kelly refers to. Kath got her work done quickly so that she could maintain community engagement in the project:

People never went off the boil, I was always back with something, with their photos on a disk, or with an edited version of their story for them to look at; another reason for the quickness was that I had nothing to show people, in the beginning. I was asking them to take a leap of faith. ‘trust me, I’m from the government!’ (8/8/08)

Kath had planned that the Nambucca and Nowra Women’s Heritage books would provide a foundation for her research in the eyes of the community:

Once I had those two books published, I had the evidence of an outcome and so they became popular. (21/5/08)
He didn’t turn up with a suit or with a book in his hand asking questions.

He sat down, had a cup of tea or something...

Ted Fields
Kath describes how her relationships with knowledge holders were formative in her perception of the work that she must undertake. Kath was also guided by her own feelings:

“When I’d met so many wonderful ladies from around Nambucca, I became more interested in them than in an object in the landscape. I’m not going to ask someone to tell me about something that’s out in their backyard – when you thought I’d come to talk to you! – it didn’t work that way because the story of their lives had to be told.” (8/8/08)

Kath’s work on the Heritage Series also built on established relationships that she had before joining DECCW:

“One lady, I knew from the family history unit [at AIATSIS]. Over a period of about 8 years she would ring up with a name to research – we were actually doing the joy of finding someone and then grieving as we found their passing, right there on the phone. This led to an experience of deep understanding that lead to me gaining this lady’s respect. I earned it, I didn’t ask for it. I nominated her and her sister for volunteer awards. I was actually so very impressed with the work they were doing.

Then there was another wonderful Elder, in Nowra – the reward and the experience you get from meeting and talking to such Elders is a real gift. Mind you, I never pushed in on anyone or on any relationship. I kept to my place. I don’t think I ever went in with the line, ‘I’m from the government and I’m going to let you do this really important project with me.’ I put across a genuine impression that what people are telling me is of immense value. I found it really does add to your life, if you listen. So people trusted that I had come to listen and I appreciated that shared experience. I didn’t try to be anybody’s second best friend. I just came from, I hope, a position of mutual respect.” (22/7/08)

The ‘mutual respect’ that Kath describes not only situates Kath and the story-tellers as equal participants in the process of oral history recording, but also creates another way of seeing. By founding the Heritage Series on a principle of collaboration, Kath gives ordinary lives a prominence that they have not previously had in DECCW’s understanding of Aboriginal heritage. In Kath’s words, her approach has been to:

“Educate government [non-Aboriginal people] – make them understand not to dispossess people from their values and beliefs by placing a government agenda or some other project agenda before them, because that is taking a holistic completeness away from Aboriginal people.” (8/8/08)

Kath’s aim with her approach is to give pre-eminence to the self-awareness of the story-teller. In this way the act of telling the story is acknowledged as a vital part of the community’s heritage. This is in addition to the content of the story. The insight that is gained by this approach is the capacity inherent in the story-teller to know the meaning and value of her or his own life. So that in telling and publishing their stories, each participant is responding to their own process of self discovery.

Kath spoke to me at length about the challenges that she observed participants encountered during this process of self discovery:

“You [the story-teller] don’t know what the questions are really going to be, even though you have received them well in advance. You don’t know where the story will go until you start telling your story. And once you start you don’t know where your line of memory time line will go – you discover things.” (8/8/08)

To support people’s preparation, Kath would provide people who had decided to tell their life stories with a list of questions in advance. These questions were not intended to dictate the terms of reference for each person’s life story, the questions were offered as ways of stimulating people’s thinking about their lives. They functioned as a sort of warm up exercise.

Kath found that telling their life stories was often an intense experience for participants:

“There is no time to build up a strong relationship [with me]. It sort of is rushed in a way. No one has your script ready. They haven’t had a script! That first initial story that you are hearing about is a one timer and you are asking people to tell you something in a short time frame. One woman visited me three times in my motel room because she knew she was dying. Another woman told me about her son’s suicide and I put it in the story in a way that didn’t infringe on her pain. And another wonderful lady, when we went back to read her story – she had all these other stories to tell.” (8/8/08)

These examples of some of the things that were background to her role in the collection of the stories, gives a sense of the
impetus that some women felt to tell their stories. They also demonstrate that the stories were often about things that were not easy to express.

Kath’s astute understanding of the emotional demands of life story-telling, as well as the kinds of circumstances in which the stories were being told also guided her role in the collaboration:

You can’t keep tapes. Sometimes there’s things on tapes that should never have been said, let alone heard. I don’t put things like that in the transcript. And when people are recording their stories I’ll try to get in on time to turn off the tape if they are getting into saying something derogatory about someone else. I work on the basis that there’s always the chance that someone may accidentally listen to the tape – so ask what is it that they want their family to hear. I always discuss content with people, so they know that they probably don’t want things on a tape that are no one’s business certainly not out there in the wide world and people agree. Sometimes they forget – so I turn the tape off until we can come back to the story. (8/8/08)

The original recordings of each person’s life story were returned to each participant. Kath did not make copies of the tapes. Kath also only kept the version of the transcript that each story-teller had approved of for publication. The emphasis in Kath’s work has been to assist the participants to produce a publication so that Aboriginal communities have their own cultural products and experiences, which in turn increase their capacity for participation with the DECCW in the management of Aboriginal heritage:

‘There is a pathway for any project that might come later’. 18

Kath’s social agenda was to demonstrate the resilience and courage of these communities, not to cast them as victims. By always respecting the truth, integrity and cultural autonomy of a community, you are speaking to this culture as a resilient culture, one that has survived, made achievements, has an identity.

Both Kath and Ray Kelly’s work was informed by the belief that their participation through research in the social agendas of Aboriginal communities would generate knowledge that could be used by Aboriginal people in the future. They treated those that they collaborated with as living sites of significance, by valuing the heritage of people as greater than that of heritage sites. They understood that if you perceive a culture as living, then you can see the living exponents of it. In turn, people could then understand themselves as contemporary conduits of a living heritage.

Treating people as living heritage had many positive outcomes. It reinforced the ethical basis of the community in regards to the governance of their research. It acknowledged the potential in the community to contribute to the larger society because what each participant contributed was valid not only for those within the community, but also had the potential to inform and contribute to Australian Aboriginal policy making in general.

Moreover, by acknowledging the existence of a community’s cultural autonomy the community itself was given an opportunity to articulate and share their own truths through a process of consensus. Then the material form of these truths, such as the stories published in the Heritage Series, allows for the communication and sharing of knowledge with future generations.

Their research demonstrates a great respect for the resistance of people to participate in government research. They understood the hesitancy to participate as a fear, based on past experience,
of being misrepresented or having knowledge appropriated and misused. In response, they actively participated in communities by acknowledging the power in being able to know and describe oneself in cultural terms. This emotional integrity in relation to knowledge allowed for a further reaffirmation of the experience of knowing. It also recognises that knowledge is mediated by how it feels as well as what it means.

Ray Kelly resisted the subjugation of cultural meaning of sites to science and Kath resisted the subjugation of family history to the science of landscape assessment. In terms of knowledge, they treated participation and experiential knowledge as equal to theoretical knowledge and essential to working with aural cultures.

Wellbeing is an outcome of the transmission of knowledge between Aboriginal people. For Ray Kelly this was understood in terms of giving a depth of meaning to identity as a provider of a foundation for life and spiritual comfort. For Kath the transmission of knowledge enabled the unlocking of the past; the freedom to tell your story and to look back. Although people may experience reduced wellbeing as a consequence of their disadvantage in some areas of their lives, they are always a person of substance with the capacity for resilience afforded to them by their heritage.

11 Kath Schilling conducted her research as the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage Coordinator for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and subsequently the Department of Environment and Climate Change (now DECCW). Ray Kelly conducted his research for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (now DECCW).

12 In this book when I first introduce someone I refer to their full name and in subsequent references drop their last name and just use their first name. However, out of respect for the late Ray Kelly, and because he is viewed as a significant Elder by many Aboriginal people in the community and in DECCW, I retain his full name throughout this book.

13 An account of this project, and the publications which emerged from it can be seen at the DECCW website: http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nswcultureheritage/fishing.htm


15 I was a member of the organising committee for the forum and learned from my fellow committee members, Phil Sullivan and Paul Houston about the significant role model that Ray Kelly had been for many of the Aboriginal people who joined DECCW to work in Aboriginal culture and heritage conservation.

16 For an example, see Ted Field’s account of Ray Kelly’s visits to his community in Chapter 5 in Kijas, J (2005) Revival, Renewal and Return: Ray Kelly and the NSW Sites of Significance Survey, Department of Environment and Conservation (now DECCW), Sydney.

17 I am grateful to Karen Bland (Project Officer, Aboriginal Sites Awareness Training, Central Aboriginal Heritage Region, Culture and Heritage Division, DECCW) for suggesting that the notion of sites of significance could be applied to people as well as landscapes.

18 This is a quote from Kath Schilling, noted by the author during a conversation.

Right: Kath discussing Women’s Heritage books with community members.
Photo courtesy of Kath Schilling.
Chapter 3: Our Voice

My insight into what I experienced and felt during this research project
Our Voice

My insight into what I experienced and felt during this research project

Pamela Young

Pamela Young

My day job

For the last twelve years my role has been that of Aboriginal Discovery Ranger at the Royal National Park, here in Sydney NSW. This role consists of taking groups of school children of all ages, disabled groups and aged care groups and people of diverse cultures to somewhere that has a safe environment where they can enjoy being out in the landscape and hearing the stories of Country. The tours coincide with the school syllabus for all ages. I do tours at various locations within the Royal National Park and in Kamay (Aboriginal name) Botany Bay National Park as well as other national parks in different regions. I talk about Aboriginal people of the area, the landscape, biodiversity, culture, heritage, customs and values. This gives people a better understanding of Aboriginal culture.

What people aren’t aware of is that there has to be a lot of trust in doing this type of job because every tour that I do is with a different group of people, all with different attitudes and beliefs and values. It requires a great deal of understanding about how to approach people and to be aware of their sensitiveness right from the first meeting. I was doing a tour the other day and a child remarked, ‘Pamela, you’re the first Aboriginal person I have ever met’. I told her how proud I was to be her first. She replied, ‘me too’, at the end of the day she wanted to be an Aboriginal person too.

How I got involved in the Wellbeing Research Project

I have also worked with various Aboriginal communities in the Sydney metropolitan area from Redfern to La Perouse, and Wollongong; even in country areas, like Moree. I have had some prior sort of research background. In 2004, I attended some oral history workshops with Kath Schilling. In 2006 Berenice asked me if I was interested in working with her on the Wellbeing Project (the oral history evaluation is part of this project) and that is how I arrived at this point today.
The meeting place

I found that meeting and greeting with the Kyogle women of the community had to be in familiar safe surroundings. This can make women feel relaxed. Make sure you have with a cuppa ready and a feed to break the ice. Then people started to mingle and talk and familiarities are then conveyed. Everyone starts to laugh loudly; this opened the door for discussions. The women was laughing about some stories; just off the top of their head.

We all are ushered into the rooms required for the workshop. Everyone is anxious and waits patiently. The women then sit and listen with anticipation to a presentation about the process of recording an oral history.

The background of the Heritage books that have already been published and distributed to the communities was then talked about. Especially how the Aboriginal communities took control of their stories and the benefits they achieved and how their families and communities responded. This gave everyone an insight of what to expect and how the community can deliver their own oral histories. I watched the group, which consisted of some Elders, an older group of women and teenagers. When it was suggested to the group that they can talk about themselves and family history their body language changed, from at ease to confronting.

Some women slowly started to close the doors of time protection of their lives; they didn’t want to be exposed, they didn’t need to justify their lives and their existence to anyone any more, especially government. What will government take from us this time? Just a couple of older women slammed the doors quickly. It was as if they felt as though they had been there before. Is this government coming to knock down our doors again? It made me think that even though this was about them owning their stories, their fear and distrust of government was still apparent to me. I think they were confused because they haven’t been allowed to speak in the past, and must have been wondering, ‘How come now?’ What could the government be trying to get from them now? From how they acted and what they said to me, this is how it seemed to me. To me, it was that they had to deal with who they are and what is it they had to present in the community, the justification of their existence, their own identity, their cultural significance background. This took a great deal of consideration for the women to comprehend.
After several discussions they had an understanding that we weren't there to steal their words, their sense of belonging, their voices of acknowledgement, their cultural wealth. They understood then that the stories are of their own background, their endurance and survival, whether of their past or present; and how and what everyone can benefit from … and that this is what they had to offer if they wanted to.

Some of the women talked about racism in the community. They weren't too sure if they could deal with the exposure of their lives that they have protected for so long. I understood their thoughts too, about how telling your story is personal. I could relate to this because, as Aboriginal people, we were always told that we are not of importance, so now how can we expect others to understand? I think they were wondering why they should run the risk of exposing themselves only to be shamed again.

When you are doing oral history workshops, there has to be a lot of sensitivity. At the Kyogle workshop, women were experiencing a lot of different emotions. They were also engaging in Native Title negotiations and they were very protective of what they had to say as anyone working for government was viewed as a possible threat.

From conversations I'd had with some of the women and from things that they said at the workshop, there were still issues with past government policies against Aboriginal people from the mission days fresh in their minds. And they weren't ready to turn back the pages of time; it was still hurtful. Some of the women did want to progress, but trust wasn't strong enough to allow the door to open yet because it was questioning their identity, their vulnerability, and when it did, it would flow with its fury to destruction without consequences of what damage could it cause.

Were they ready to let the floodgate of emotions flow? Everyone sat in silence waiting for the next person to say something. People had approached them before for their stories and they are still waiting for the follow up; they had talked about how they felt used like in the old days. I looked at their faces of grief so present as if they had stepped back in time to the injustice that had been inflicted on their lives. The women looked at the young ones and said, OK.

The younger group were stunned to see their family members so hurt to tell stories that would be so painful and at first they wasn't sure if it was right for them to witness this. Everyone had a break and thought about whether to go ahead and record. We all sat together and started to talk about yarns and funny scenarios and then the laughter induced its happy self to everyone and made it at ease.

Talking to the women, I could see that this was a surprise for them to hear from a government department saying you have control of what stories you have to offer. That ownership is yours, it's your heritage. They responded, 'Our stories aren't important to tell.' However, when the group thought about it they said, 'We are getting older, and our families need to know about our lives. No more silence, we do have a voice.'

After the break we went back still laughing and everyone knew what to expect of each other. The young ones would record the older women.

The response after the recordings from the young ones was that they said they didn't know some of the stories and were glad to hear them.

When everyone had finished their stories everything was handed back to them. What researchers need to know is that every community is different and to approach them culturally sensitive to the needs of the oldest living culture of today; they deserve respect and honesty.

When it was in my mind to write this story, I had the opportunity (23/10/08) to speak to another woman who was there at the workshop. Amanda Bryant, the Area Manager (National Parks and Wildlife Service) at Kyogle told me of her recollections of events:

There were about fourteen women present including three or four teenagers. We had a spread of generations. The idea was for the teenagers to interview the older women. The most beneficial part of the workshop for the women was the transfer of knowledge. Some of the younger ones said, 'We didn't know that' and so too some of the women. They haven't let go of it, but it was met with a degree of suspicion.

The other major thing that was happening around Kyogle at that time was the Native Title negotiations. We were seen as a government agency supporting the Native Title, so anybody that didn't want to engage with the Native Title claim didn't want to be involved in the oral history project, because they saw Native Title as divisive.

One woman saw engaging with oral history as engaging with their family history. It took them back to the mission days and that took them back to contact days and it became extremely emotional. Others still wanted to be engaged.

The resolution of the Native Title claim distracted everyone. Anyone who was going to be active in the oral history was also active in the Native Title process. The Native Title negotiations were the community's priority.

I've seen this emotional dimension several times. This community is still very isolated and a lot of them are living on the old mission site in a rural area where there are not many opportunities.

The book project lost momentum due to the Native Title commitments. We are starting to reinvigorate it again. An Aboriginal woman who was employed as an outcome of the Indigenous Land Use Agreement and a woman who's moved from Central Australia to join our staff as a ranger have gone around the community and surprisingly picked up women who were resistant the first time.

The 'I don't want to be shamed no more', is a big issue with the women up here. We also had suspicion from the men. They thought we were recording a book about cultural heritage and there would be things that the women couldn't talk about.

Kyogle gave me an understanding of the doors closing. Amanda had told us, 'It's no good to float in and out'. We made sure we stayed so that we had a longer time for the community. They were aware of what it could be, but they weren't sure if they were right to do it. And is this what the government wants; not stones and bones anymore? They realised they did have a story to tell and I think that's what surprised them the most; that they didn't have to justify their existence in the present about the past. It is confronting for Aboriginal people to go back into the past. With the evaluation of the oral history books the shut doors are starting to open and allowing them to walk through with pride and honour.
The value of publishing Aboriginal stories

My story of the Kyogle workshop told what was at stake for the women, but also, what was to be seen when they opened the door and talked a little bit to the younger women about their oral histories. Some people may say that it’s good that this type of activity is being done, but what benefit is government making for the rest of the society from doing these books?

Aboriginal voices, in my experience, have been perceived as derogatory status, no one values what we say. Some people I have spoken to over the years say that from the moment Aboriginal people are born, our colour and our voices are political. But they didn’t necessarily want that political label. Aboriginal writing gives us permission to have that strong voice and for this to be positive for us, not derogatory. Mick Dodson says this:

*Literature and its creations are so important to the lives of everyone. It can be used as a powerful political tool by Aboriginal people in a political system which restricts us mostly voiceless. It can give us confidence and pride to raise our voices through silence.*

I find his words so inspiring of the fact that these oral histories are written down and that means they are becoming part of an Aboriginal literature tradition that empowers us all. In the same book where I found Mick Dodson speaking about Aboriginal literature there is an important message about a letter that Bennelong wrote:

*Aboriginal writing begins with Bennelong’s letter of 1796 the first known text in English by an Aboriginal author. Aboriginal literature writing grew directly from a complex and ancient wellspring of oral and visual communication and exchange. It’s generally agreed that at the end of the eighteenth century there were hundreds of distinct Aboriginal societies in Australia each of which possessed a rich cultural mercantile and day to day languages and forms of expression that had been intact for tens of thousands of years.*

*From the early days writing became a tool of negotiation in which Aboriginal voices could be heard in a form recognisable to a British colony.*

The oral history workshops are of the present which leads to the future. We are doing the same thing as Bennelong in the past. We all are in that ancient wellspring connection. What we were saying to all those women was, ‘Your Aboriginal style of presenting – that has a lot of meaning – it is yours, you don’t have to justify it to anyone; that is of you’.

We are in those two worlds now, the English text and the Aboriginal English. Yet why were the women of Kyogle told by the authorities in the past to shut up and not say anything? It was as if Bennelong was saying in 1796, ‘I can play your game mate, I can write’. Look at the difference in time; that big timeline gap between 1796 and 2008, when our latest oral history book has been published. So much Aboriginal writing has appeared during that timeline and yet Aboriginal people, like the women at Kyogle, are still constantly asking permission of themselves to record their own personal stories for other people to read or to understand. They still don’t trust that our voices ‘could be heard in a form recognisable to a British colony’.

It reminded me of my days in the government home. The rule every Sunday was to write a letter. When I see Bennelong’s letter, I see it has this great long trail behind it, they are connections that never end. What is in them we can always connect with, what is in the words? That is how the ancient oral wellspring is the source of the wellbeing for the women and men who record their oral histories.
Doing the review of the oral history books

In 2006 I worked with Berenice from the Research Section of the Country, Culture and Heritage Division in researching the feelings of the women and men who had done oral history books with DECCW.

In doing this research, my role began with contacting by telephone the women and men who had contributed to the previous oral history books. The purpose was to gain from these women and men feedback and information about how they now felt about having shared their story. I checked whether they got any responses from family, community, any organisations such as libraries, schools, newspapers etc. and what they felt about these responses. This feedback was important in assessing the impact of the oral history project on the women and men and its reception in the broader community.

This project gave me the understanding to be able to speak freely and honestly and with a depth of sensitivity with the women and men who contributed their wealth of knowledge.

The process of phone contact with each woman and man for this new project followed the following pattern. To begin, I first had to identify myself as an Aboriginal woman and which Aboriginal Clan group and what Family Name I’m from and what government organisation. I then explained to them that I was following up the women’s and men’s oral history books that Kath Schilling, Aboriginal Women’s Cultural Heritage Research Officer, had done with numerous women and men from country areas in NSW. After speaking to the women and men and clarifying my role I then discussed the aim of their participation in the collection of their stories.

I had three questions that I aimed to have answered by the end of our conversation. I would have their story open in front of me and speak about what was between the lines. In a natural way we would answer the three questions:

- What were the main benefits that resulted from recording your oral history?
- What do you value most about your cultural heritage?
- How relevant was the project that you did with us to that?

I did not record anything without their permission. We would agree on their words for inclusion in the evaluation and I would read them back exactly what I had written down.

The only men’s book in the series is from Walgett and Collarenebri. Most of what I have to say about how I did my research is about what happened with women. Also, my experience with the men was different because they were the first men to record their oral histories for the series. Most of the women had followed in the footsteps of the other books.

One of the men in the Walgett book was saying that some of the men in the book went into ‘remission’; they felt like they went backwards when they told and published their stories. They thought they had said something wrong when some of community questioned their contribution in the book. When I spoke to them about their stories in the book I would then read their words in the book back to them. They said they felt proud and happy and laughed and thanked me for phoning them. It made them feel appreciated for what they had contributed.

When speaking to the women and men, discussing their stories we would often laugh loudly and joke and they’d reflect on and discuss the impact on them, of how it felt, sharing their stories. But the story didn’t stop there. As we spoke more, their stories expanded into different journeys: as the pages of the book unfolded, new words danced freely. They were so proud of what they had contributed, but even more of how a community had changed their perception of them. There was no more silence in the words of the women or the men.

Some of the women who spoke to me on the phone said, “It was just like it happened yesterday”. It was so clear in their minds yet others that I spoke to they were a bit confused and couldn’t remember what they had said; due to their age and they needed to be reminded of their words, of what they had said in their books.

The families of the participants helped me to get in touch with some of the women who had recorded their stories. For one book I was talking to the mother of one woman who I needed to contact. I explained who I was and why I was phoning about the story in the book. She said she didn’t know about the book or story. I then asked her permission to read her daughter’s story to her and she agreed.

As I read to her, she listened and commented about various things she did remember. I could hear her giggling in the background and then she said, ‘Yeah I remember those…’ She told me she was sorry now that she didn’t contribute to the book. Our conversation went on for some time. It was so good to hear this older woman laugh and reflect on her life and that of her family and community. In the end she said it was important that these stories be told so that all people could learn from them.

She commented that many women like her had felt that they didn’t have permission to tell of the past, as they were always told not to say anything to government or anyone official. Above all, they didn’t trust government or anyone that represented it. That’s why she didn’t tell her own story when she was first asked.

As I turned the pages in the book going through the timelines of their memories and experiences and speaking to each woman, I would tell them whom I would speak to next in the book. They were always supportive of each other. One woman lost her husband and they told me to be very aware of her sensitivity. I replied that I would respect their wishes.

When I rang her, and identified myself, she said she knew of me and my father; they had grown up together and that she was my relation – my aunty – I was so shocked. She said, ‘Do you have the book there with you?’ I said, ‘Yes’. She said, ‘Look at the picture in the book of the three ladies, the one on the left; that’s your grandmother’. She had red hair and curly; my eyes searched the photo for any resemblance.

‘That’s my family, that’s my dad’s mum, that my family’, I kept saying. I really felt like crying of joy and how excited I was. Here I am asking about their personal stories and now I’m finding mine, we both laughed our heads off with excitement. This aunt, my auntie, has just lost her husband last couple of months ago. The other aunty I spoke to in the book said to talk to her, as she would be really sad due to her circumstances. Well she was telling her yarns of past about my dad and my family and we were laughing so much and fighting back my tears of joy.

Aunt began to speak with so much pride that she had given me something back: my family connections, my identity and my wellbeing. She told the story of how her husband wouldn’t go to
The journey begins

After speaking to a lot of the women about the Heritage books for the feedback, I was constantly being asked from them, ‘Why aren’t you coming out and speaking to us face to face? We need to know you because the voice on the phone we hear is of the government calling.’

I discussed their responses with Berenice, and my concerns about the confusion from a lot of the women and men; why didn’t I do the right process. As an Aboriginal person I didn’t feel right also, it wasn’t the way I do business, Koori business or Murri business. We agreed that there should be a two way street of communication not a one way. We then decided that we needed to meet face to face with the communities. We had their invitation.

We spent a lot of time in planning what is the best way to meet and greet community and do return and renewal. We had their words which were a vehicle. I designed a PowerPoint presentation about each book for us to show the communities when we visited them. I remembered how Kath, Berenice and I had driven through the communities and saw the billboards along the highways which are signs welcoming people to Country.

This gave me the concept of creating a PowerPoint presentation in the form of billboards. What better way than to be driving through the community and have these big billboards coming into your face of the people who did their stories of their community and their reflections of the book in the present. Mapping of Country, stories of Country, living of Country, past and present.

On the billboards I’d put the women’s and men’s feedback who had spoken to me on the phone. I contacted the Eora Centre in Redfern and asked permission to do the PowerPoint presentations on their computers there of each of the women’s stories and their feedback. The journey begins with the PowerPoints and when they were completed we would take them to the community. They were well received by the communities, they said they would use them for presentations such as oral histories in the schools.

In the community our starting point was always to link up with the women who had collaborated with Kath, who had been the liaison point for the community. We’d always talk to Kath too, about where we were going and who to link up with. Kath always made sure we had the right contacts and would tell us how special each person is and what day their birthday was. She was really sad about not being able to come with us to meet back up with all the women, she was very fond of them all. She would also remind us that each community is different, “Take your time, get familiar with the community. Have someone of that area take you around so they will get to know you and not feel threatened”.

So we were putty in their hands as they say. Some communities would invite us to come to a meeting or barbecue or classes; we just fitted in. We would be advised who to meet and where to go next. We’d go round and meet with the women in their own homes, make sure we’d take a feed. We would also check what they were allowed to eat. Sometimes they would be a bit cheeky and say, ‘Oh I have sugar [diabetes], but I can have this today’. They deserved a treat. If it was someone’s birthday we would sing ‘Happy Birthday’. We were aware of special occasions or if we were there at any sensitive times such as a funeral. At any time I would take photos I would ask permission and then I would send them back to them, even if they weren’t clear and precise as everyone always remembered what photos one takes and they won’t let you forget it too.

For community approval there has to be a sincere responsibility. The women and men whom I spoke to were important to me, not just in my work, but to me as an Aboriginal person. It was at times an emotional, overwhelming experience for everyone to share their wealth of knowledge about their family history. Stories which allowed more opened doors and opportunities for meetings and recordings of their personal feedback. The stories and their trust and their precious memories were a wonderful powerful gift. They gave me the confidence and permission to be in the role of researcher; my respect and responsibility to them to deliver what they had entrusted to me to our project without exploitation.

Above left: Pamela underneath the Brungle sign. Photo courtesy of Berenice Carrington.

Opposite: Kamilaroi and Collarenebri signs, photos courtesy of Pamela Young.

Pamela Young
The feedback

There were some very sensitive issues when they were remembering some of their stories of their past and present memories. A lot of the older women said that they wished their stories would have been able to be told and written a long time ago, as a lot of the old people had died with their stories; 'They were our walking encyclopaedia'. And, unfortunately, for some of the old women now, their health has restricted them from fully sharing their memories.

The response to the books from the non-Aboriginal community was overwhelming and amazing to the Aboriginal women. The non-Aboriginal community said they weren’t aware of the women and their stories, but when they read their books they said to the women, they didn’t know about their stories, they had no idea. Now since the book has been done, people read it and now, people who never spoke to the Aboriginal people before, do.

There were several themes to the feedback that people gave us. Many of the Elders that I spoke to said that they felt the young ones are our future generations, their extension of us and they wanted the next generations to know of their heritage and to be proud of it.

Many of the women and men who had recorded their stories in the books also talked to us about some of the feelings that they had to overcome to be able to do that. The major response was that they felt that they didn’t have permission to tell of the past, as they were always told not to say anything to government or anyone as they weren’t important enough and that they always needed to have permission to do anything. They didn’t trust government. Or anyone that represented them.

The biggest change from recording their stories, as people informed us in their feedback, has been to feel confident about what they have done with participating in the Heritage books and have done a good thing for their communities and for themselves. The excitement and pride of their stories they all said it needed to be done. Sadly time was of essence, too short and they felt rushed as they would have told more. However, they were very proud to have their story told. They said it made them feel good.

The following six chapters present the feedback from the participants in our evaluation. Their feedback concerns their experiences of recording and publishing their oral histories in the Heritage Series. Each chapter begins with a regional profile of the place where the book is situated; I include personal memories from Kath Schilling on her role in each book and an outline of the details of the visits made to each community by Pamela Young and I.

Pamela Young and I have aimed to reproduce to the best of our ability the exact message that each participant in the evaluation delivered to us as their feedback.
Chapter 4: Nambucca feedback
Regional profile

Nambucca Shire is situated on the mid-north coast and covers an area of 1,433 square kilometres with a coastline of approximately 20 kilometres. The Shire is divided geographically into two main areas - the rugged topography of the eastern edges of the New England Plateau in the west and the eastern area which is characterised by the gentle slopes of the Nambucca River and Taylor’s Arm floodplains and adjacent undulating lands.

The main population centres are Nambucca Heads, Macksville, Valla Beach, Scott’s Head and Bowraville. The main economic activities within Nambucca include agriculture and manufacturing, retail, health and community services, construction, education and hospitality/tourism.

At the time of the 2006 Census, the Indigenous population of the Nambucca Local Government Area (LGA) was estimated to be 1,026 or 5.7% of the total LGA population of 17,897.

Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nambucca book

The Nambucca collection of women’s oral histories is the first in the series. It was published in 2003. The project focussed on women living in the Nambucca Valley on the NSW lower North Coast. Nine women recorded their oral histories. During the process of recording their histories the women visited places that were significant to them, in particular the former Aboriginal reserve on Stuart Island. The women also described the places where they obtained bush tucker, the places where they played as children and the schools they attended.

The Elder’s stories tell of being moved away from the areas where they grew up to places like the reserve on Bellwood Road and to Bowraville, where people lived on an unofficial Aboriginal reserve until the 1950s. Now the community lives along Gumbayngirr Road on land held by the Local Aboriginal Land Council. The Elders tell of their feelings for the areas where their families had gathered wild foods to supplement their diets. The Elders talk about how they were raised with strict rules about behaviour and strong commitment to particular social values. The stories are about looking back with nostalgia, while at the same time recalling the harsh ways in which they lived. The Elders remember the things that they achieved, such as raising money for the war effort, singing and winning races and overcoming difficult circumstances to succeed. They are stories about the way these Aboriginal communities were in the second part of the last Century and about what it was like to participate in that world.

Kath Shilling recalls how she collaborated with the community to produce the Nambucca book:

The first trip I made was to the Land Council and I also met my collaborator, Virginia Jarrett. I had looked up the Nambucca Aboriginal Land Council because I didn’t know any other groups.
The Land Council told me that they had someone in mind to act as my community collaborator. Then Virginia Jarrett and I met and she agreed and we both felt we could work together. I did a flyer about the oral history project and Virginia took it around. Every time I went there, we took the flyer around with us and gave it out when we dropped in on people.

Then we had some trouble in Bowraville, with some community feeling that I should have gone to their Land Council first, and they were right, if the project were only dealing with Bowraville. They were irritated with the Service (NPWS back then), taking stories, and enforcing hunting restrictions, something I wasn’t familiar with at that stage. I was approached by a couple of angry people right during a time when we were interviewing one Elder lady from Bowraville. There was nothing to do but to stand our ground, as the Elder wanted to tell her story and they wanted us to go. So they stated their grievance and I insisted we were in different times and as we had been invited there by the Elder, we were staying to finish off what had been started. It was uncomfortable, but they went away and we stayed. But it turned out okay in the end because this man ran into us the next day and said, ‘Come back anytime, just take that bloody sticker off your car when you do.’

On the second trip to Nambucca, I spent ten days there and visited everyone we’d talked to earlier. I was in Gumbaynggirr Country – very much in someone else’s Country so I kept to my place. It was very much Virginia’s process and role to direct what we did. We had morning teas on Stuart Island, the island where the old mission had been. We’d go on the Island for picnics. I packed something to eat and made a big thermos to take.

During the third trip, Virginia had organised a big ‘do’ at the Golf Club on Stuart Island and people read through the stories we’d recorded of them. We had the stories changed or modified, spelling checked and then approved. My fourth trip was for the launch at the Language Centre, with Gumbaynggirr Radio interviewing people live. Virginia was as proud as any person could be.

Later, Virginia was approached by some members of the community who accused her of helping to take the Elder’s oral histories away. But the stories were still there, we didn’t have the elder’s stories taken away, because they were there, in books, stories and pride for the wider community. Nambucca had that special privileged position of being the first [of the] publications. Eventually the younger ones took pride in being the first community to come on board and both Virginia and the Elders were asked to speak about their experience. (22/7/08)

Berenece asked Kath why Nambucca had been chosen for the study:

Tony English was doing The Sea and Rock Gives Us a Feed in Coffs Harbour21. It was sort of an area that they thought was going to be a high impact area with development. It was Denis’s suggestion [Denis Byrne, Manager of the Research Section].

Kath met a community that had reservations about collaborating with a government department:

The younger ones were edgy; however, the older women were pleased as punch. The young ones were looking for their role – they had a more politicised view of things. The mistrust issues were addressed by delivering on the project. I had the same problems and issues in Nowra, then Brungle. (29/9/06)

The Nambucca book formed the foundation for Kath’s approach to recording and publishing this type of oral history:

It ended up that the transcribers had difficulty with the Gumbaynggirr accents and could only record a limited amount of what was on the tapes. So I did my own transcribing, editing simultaneously. The transcripts that were returned to the women in Nambucca caused unpleasant feelings for the women, reading a transcript by itself is all over the place, and so I changed my approach. The approach became: record, transcribe, edit, return the tape and the edited story to the person for checking. The tape was retained by the family, no copies are kept by DECCW. The transcripts were deleted six months after the book is published. The main object of the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage as I came to understand it was to produce the publications. (31/1/06)
Berenice and Pamela’s visit to Nambucca Heads

Our first visit to Nambucca was from the 11th to the 15th of June in 2007. We made our second trip from the 16th to the 18th of April in 2008. Pamela found out from her phone calls to Elders in Nambucca who had told their stories in the book, that many of them were involved in the Gumbaynggirr Nambucca Valley Elders Choir, a choir which meets regularly at the Muurabay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative.

On our first visit to Nambucca we met with some of the Elders at the Language and Culture Cooperative. During our visit we heard that the choir would be performing in Redfern and we would be able to meet a few more of the Elders who had told their stories. During their visit to Sydney we arranged a picnic at Botany Bay National Park for the choir, where a member of the La Perouse Aboriginal community greeted them and welcomed them to Country.

On our second trip to Nambucca, to follow up with some of the Elders, we presented the choir with a message stick from a La Perouse community member who had participated in the picnic.

Summary of the feedback

A very strong theme throughout the Elder’s feedback is a concern for the welfare of the children and young people in their community. There are specific things that the Elders want the children to know; the social values of caring and sharing, the Aboriginal history of the region, and to understand the spiritual and cultural side of their Aboriginal identities.

The Elders described the feelings that they’d experienced after recording and publishing their stories and these included: good, happy, and proud. Many of the Elders use the book as a teaching resource with their grandchildren and in schools.

Feedback from the story-tellers:

Some story-tellers were unable to be contacted and we regret to have missed out on their contribution to this evaluation. Other story-tellers were contacted during Pamela and Berenice’s visits, however could not be contacted again to gain final approval for their input into this book. Where this follow-up was not successful the story-teller’s input has been included anonymously.

Unnamed Story-teller 1

I felt good. My story needed to be done. My point of view is you can’t talk to the young person but they can read the book. Today they have a good life, not like our days; we had it hard. I want the young ones to know caring and sharing; walk strong and be proud of who you are. Sharing stories is important.

Unnamed Story-teller 2

Family will talk about the book; talk to the grandchildren about the past. We can be thank-full for what we are today and telling the stories through Aboriginal eyes. Educating ignorance we are becoming the teachers through the book.

Valerie Smith Cohen

Sadly, Valerie was unable to participate in the evaluation.

Yvonne Davis Jarrett

Sadly, Yvonne passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

Ann Flanders-Edwards

I felt so happy. I read it to all my grandkids. I light a little fire and tell them all my little stories. I like reading them to my grandkids. They are all good learning stories for our kids about what our people have been through in the past. Everything I do today is for my grandkids. My kids have taken a step back. When kids ask questions I tell them the truth. I still take the grandkids home (the racetrack) – that’s where my ancestors are. I went over there yesterday afternoon and I just sat there, that’s where my parents and my grandparents are.

I give talks to the kids at the Catholic School and they have kids that come down from Sydney too. I’ve started writing my own little bits here and there. All the stuff we had when I was growing up: bush food, dirt floors and the bush brooms.

I am really proud of that little book. If Kath and Virginia didn’t go round to our Elders and get their stories our grandkids wouldn’t know.

Alma Jarrett

Showing the kids of the past to learn and be thankful for what you have today. You got to study to get jobs and get educated.

Amy Marshall Jarrett

It really feels good that we can learn from the past, and what we’ve already learnt will help us build a better and more compassionate future for our younger and future generations. I didn’t know my culture. I did know about sacred sites but since doing language classes I learnt more history: Yuludarra Dreaming. When I’m learning it was like I was reborn again, a great peace over myself. I am a proud Gumbaynggirr woman. I was born in Bellingen NSW. My mum was from Ngambaa Tribe, she was traditional.

Amy had just come back from Coffs Harbour for the Elders Olympics on NBN TV.

Emily Walker

The only person who said anything to me about the book when it was published was my brother, Russell. He said, ‘Why should women have it?’ And I said, ‘You can do your own book.’ Women are the ones who do things in this community, more so than the men. We are the ones always called on.

I was the chair of NSW Aboriginal Languages Committee for six years, I know all the jargon that they use at meetings. I’m Chair of Ngambaa Bindarry Girirma. I still go over and do my things, whatever I want to do. They get me to award the prefect medals to the kids at the school. I was there and this little boy says to his teacher, ‘Is that the Queen?’ I was there and I had my hat on you see.

You have to show respect to the kids to have their respect. I wrote a poem about that.

Opposite: A photo of Emily Walker, the author of the poem.
Our children are important people
They are the future of the land
Many a hurdles they’ll find are like steeples
As Elders we have to respect them and hold their hand

Poem by Emily Walker
Jessie Williams

Just letting everyone know what my life story was. We all have different stories. (Auntie Jessie holds up a copy of her published autobiography) When you read that, you know everything about me. I am an open book. It took ten years to write my story. I put a little one in the Nambucca book. Sue is putting it in the jail so they will get the spiritual side. So they will understand Aboriginality and know their own culture.

I spoke three times on radio when they launched the book.

One thing: when I went down there (to Sydney), as I was going into Cronulla my father’s spirit came. As we got to the sea I said to Auntie Em, I said, ‘I’d better get out because my father’s spirit was so strong’. I walked around and his spirit was so strong. He was born in Berry, as a young man went out to La Pa [La Perouse], learnt how to make a Boomerang from Joe Timbery and learned how to throw it. I had a lovely sleep that night and next day. I felt so strong singing, because he was still with me.

21 Tony English collaborated in a research project with members of the Gumbaynggirr community to record the locations and history of using wild foods and medicines. The research focussed on Corindi Beach, NSW. The Sea and Rock Gives Us a Feed is a Feed is published by DECCW and is available as a pdf for free download from www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

22 In keeping with the format of the Heritage Series, all feedback is given under individual names in alphabetical order; the feedback of the story-tellers where final approval was not gained is presented first to ensure anonymity.
Chapter 5: Nowra feedback
Nowra feedback

Berenice Carrington and Pamela Young

Regional profile

Nowra is situated in the Shoalhaven Local Government Area, which covers 4,558 square kilometres. Nowra/Bomaderry, Ulladulla/Milton and Berry comprise the major commercial and retail centres. Tourism, dairy farming and processing, paper production and fishing are the dominant industries.

At the time of the 2006 Census, the Indigenous population of the Shoalhaven Local Government Area (LGA) was estimated to be 3,311 or 3.7% of the total LGA population of 88,405.

Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nowra book

Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nowra is the second book in the Heritage Series. Nine Aboriginal women from the South Coast region of New South Wales recorded their oral histories. Although the stories centre on Nowra, their stories recollect working lives and family histories that are linked to the South Coast landscape.

The Elders tell stories of their hard working lives picking fruit and vegetables, farm labouring and working as domestics for non-Indigenous families. Alongside this work they raised families and found the time to participate in their own communities. The book centres on Nowra, but it also describes places that some of the women have attachments to, such as travelling in family groups to pick the season’s vegetables at Potato Point, near Bodalla and regular picking work at Terara, Bega and Worrigee. Other stories describe personal connections to significant historical places, such as the Bomaderry Children’s Home, and Roseby Park, the Aboriginal reserve. Their stories reveal a little known history of the contribution made by Aboriginal women to the local economy and to non-Indigenous families in the region.

Below is Kath Schilling’s recollection of the process of collaborating with the community to record and publish Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nowra.

I was doing Nowra at the same time as Nambucca. I approached Nowra to balance out the North Coast with the South Coast. I approached the Nowra Aboriginal Land Council and spoke to Sonny Simms. He introduced me to Lynette Simms as my collaborator. I gave myself over to Lynette’s guidance, because I was on her Country. We wrote letters to people and dropped flyers off. Jerrinja LALC wanted a separate project. But it was a start to just have Nowra people involved.

In the beginning I attended a huge community gathering organised by Iris White, (ATSIC). There were lots of Aboriginal women there – they were horrified [that we were proposing to do an oral history]. They made their objections very clear; ‘another government department coming to take photos, knowledge, and words and making their own careers out of our lives and then we’d never hear anything as has happened in the past’. They were quite vocal.

They did know me from my days at AIATSIS, because I’d completed a project with the NSW Land Council about genealogies from La Perouse to Jerrinja. I reminded them of that; they had received their information back from the genealogies, but also from eight years of interaction from the AIATSIS Family History Unit as well. But they were still concerned. To them, I was working for a proper government department now and, therefore, I was tarred with the same (Government) brush.

And please note that it is correct that a lot of academics did make their careers from collecting information from Aboriginal people. Nowra’s objection was real. After that meeting with Iris White’s group, some of the women approached me and said that they were not having a go at me personally, just at the government. For those who did participate, I returned their books to them and put all their photos on CD, with the originals, so that they would not have to give their original photos out to anyone in future, they received far more back than I had taken for the publication.

Above: From left to right is: Diedre Martin, Graham Moore, Pamela Young, Maude Moore, Barbara Mackenzie (Maude’s daughter) and Berenice Carrington in a photo taken in the grounds of the old Bomaderry children’s home during a visit to Nowra in May 2008. Photo courtesy of Rod Wellington.
Berenice and Pamela’s visit to Nowra

Our visit to Nowra took place from the 14th to the 16th of May 2008. We contacted Sonny Simms and arranged to use the old Bomaderry Children’s home as a meeting place to talk to the women who had participated in the Heritage book. Rod Wellington, the Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer based at Nowra, let the Elders know that we were coming to visit. We also involved Graham Moore, an Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer from the Southern Region, because his mother, Maude Moore, is one of the Elders who told her story in the book. Deidre Martin, the local Aboriginal Discovery Coordinator helped us out with transport and following up with some of the Elders.

Summary of the feedback

There is a sense in the feedback from the Elders that they are showing the world their history for the first time. Stepping forward to tell their stories after so much silence must have taken a great deal of courage. Maude Moore talks about the disrespect for Aboriginal culture and symbols that persists in some sections of the broader Nowra community. In particular, she describes how the local Mayor burnt an Aboriginal flag that she’d sat up sewing all night. These Elders, through their stories, appear to be helping their community to assert the significance of their shared history. This support has also extended to distributing their copies of the Nowra book to schools, to family and to friends.

The women who we spoke to described the process of recording and publishing their oral histories as something that they enjoyed doing. Nellie Mooney stressed the importance of Elders advising family members about their intentions to record and publish their oral history, so that relatives are not taken by surprise to find their names in print.

Feedback from the story-tellers:

Alice Adams

Sadly, Alice passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

Cheryl Carpenter

Cheryl didn’t feel like talking the day we met. However, while we were explaining the purpose of the review, Cheryl looked through the Nowra book and made the following comments:

To tell you the honest truth I haven’t read the book. I got one copy and I gave it to my sister. I enjoyed it. A bit sad too. I used to sit on the steps with my brother, we was eating the tinned meat then and crying thinking about what was my Mum and Dad eating for dinner. Hard times but good times.

Cheryl looking at an old photo of herself at the start of her story:

Ooh stylin’ up there! I used to be a size 8. That was the best time. I reckon those ones [houses on the mission] are better than what they got there now. I still go to the mish to get my oysters. We always had a feed of sea food.

Later, Cheryl spoke to Rod Wellington and Deidre Martin and said that she was happy with the books.

Grace Coombes

Sadly, Grace passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

Nellie Mooney

I’m happy with it. The school’s got it at Ulladulla High, I donated my book to them. My friend printed me out a copy from the web, because she thought I didn’t have one! Another friend was at Fitzroy Falls and saw the book in a display on the wall. I felt so proud that the story was getting out. I didn’t know that the schools use it. There were things about the stolen generation I didn’t know. The book is tracing a history trip down memory lane. There’s a wonderful collection of stories. It’s a feeling within (your Aboriginal heritage). My grandson, he’s 19 now, when he was little he saw a small dead snake – they were telling him not to touch and to be careful – he said, “I’m Aboriginal, I’m OK”. No matter who you talk to there is always a connection.

My advice to anyone telling their story for the first time is to speak to your family and anyone else whose name you might mention when you are talking so they know about it and can tell you if they are comfortable to have their name published in your story.

Maude Moore

Maude on the experience of recording the oral history:

Very good it was. She was a nice lady to talk to, very polite. Some people you can talk to and some you can’t.

Started the Cultural Centre [the Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Nowra, now due for demolition] at my house when the kids were little. It was put there for every walk of life to use. Lot of history there, my brother and sister got buried from there. They had weddings, funerals, deb balls. There was a few of us set it up. There was Auntie Janie Ardler, Auntie Gracie, Auntie Effie (little Ethel); Auntie Bell McLeod, Auntie Effie and the Bell sisters, Auntie Beryl, Auntie Maudie and Auntie Edna. We used to take in all the old alcoholics off the street. I was at the culture centre fourteen and half years ago.

The land is valuable; [a supermarket chain] wants it – when they want the land they take it off the Aborigines. To me it’s greediness with no respect to the people, they could have built around it. Nobody wanted the land when we got it for the centre. It was a big hole there, across the road was the sales yard, it was a dirty old hole.
I think I’ve worked in all the halls and rooms here when we were raising funds for the cultural centre. I’ve got it all in a book at home, a lot of water passed under the bridge. After the centre opened we had a raising of the Aboriginal flag on the official pole in Nowra for NAIDOC day; I sat up ‘til 3 o’clock in the morning sewing it by hand. Eddie raised the Koori flag up and Greg Watson [Mayor of Nowra] took it down and burnt it.

When my brother-in-law died I planted three roses, I’ll ask them for them when they tear it down. It upsets me when I go past it. I have a cry to myself. Someone comes along… they should have put someone in there who was knowledgeable about bookwork. It passed from one family to another, that’s not the way to do things.

Rose Mumbler Village is a beautiful place for old people. The ones that put the petition up, they ended up there. They are long gone. It’s all changed now, it’s all fenced off and gates up the front stop the old people getting out.

I worked there for three and a half years. I took care of Auntie Celia. She was such an old princess. She was only a tiny little thing. She’d sit up and talk about her family. She loved my pumpkin scones and soup. I found her… in bed; they took her in an Ambulance to Berry hospital. I ended up leaving because I couldn’t… they end up like one of your family.

**Lynette Simms**

Lynette spoke to Rod Wellington and Deidre Martin, who said that she was happy with the books.

**Glenda Carpenter Smith**

Unfortunately, Glenda was unable to attend the feedback session.

**Barbara Timbery**

Sadly, Barbara was unable to participate in the feedback.

23 When it opened, the Rose Mumbler Village was the first retirement home for Aboriginal people to open on the south coast; there were nursing homes and retirement homes in Sydney and in Kempsey.
In the background: Roseby Park, 1959. National Archives of Australia: A 1200, L 32020

Clockwise from top: Diedre Martin, Graham Moore, Rod Wellington and Berenice Carrington during a visit to Nowra in May 2008; Taken during the same visit is Maude Moore, Berenice Carrington and Rod Wellington; and, examining the Nowra Heritage Book together, is Diedre Martin, the local Aboriginal Discovery Coordinator, and Glenda Carpenter Smith.
Chapter 6: Brungle & Tumut feedback
Regional profile

Situated in South West New South Wales on the Snowy Mountains Highway, Tumut is the hub of Tumut Shire, which also embraces Adelong and Batlow. The main industry in the area is agriculture. Emerging industries are: manufacturing, building and tourism. The Tumut region is at the northern end of Kosciuszko National Park. Brungle is a small village about 20 kilometres north of Tumut. Brungle has a population of about 200.

At the time of the 2006 Census, the Indigenous population of Tumut Shire was estimated to be 354 or 3.3% of the total population of 10,801.

Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Brungle & Tumut book

Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Brungle & Tumut is the third book in the Heritage Series. The mission at Brungle is the focus for this book. Nine Aboriginal women from the Brungle and Tumut valleys recorded their oral histories.

This book is about life on the Brungle Mission Station. The Elder’s stories recreate a world where, although the families were subject to extensive government control, their day-to-day experiences of this way of life were enriched by their families and by their heritage. Although they had very little money and no electricity or running water they remember their homes as comfortable and cheerful places.

Some of the Elders describe childhoods which involved travelling with their fathers when they went away to get paid work. One woman began her married life on the Mission and describes how the Welfare Board forced her and her family to leave because of her fair skin. Another woman came to Tumut to settle when she was pregnant with her first child and describes her consternation when she was given a bed on the hospital veranda for a few days.

The stories record the Elders’ feelings of belonging and attachment to the place and to the people.

Here is Kath Schilling’s recollection of collaborating with the community to produce Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Brungle & Tumut:

I had a call from Dean [Freeman, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, CHD, DECCW] who wanted to do a women’s heritage book. He arranged an invitation for me to talk to the Land Council. I had a lovely meeting with a group of women up there. Gary Currey [Manager, Southern Region, Aboriginal Heritage Operations Branch] had just put on Fiona Hamilton [Aboriginal Heritage Planning Officer] and he asked me if I would like to train her in oral history recording. I was happy to do so. I also took Sabine [Publications Officer] with me to take photos. A photographer I wasn’t at that stage.

On the first day I showed Fiona the ropes and she was fine after that. Fiona did a couple and I did a couple [of interviews]. It was a good training exercise. We were there for a week. There was an initial meeting planned for all the women who wanted to record their stories, but it was cold and we didn’t have everyone there. Marg Berg, the Land Council Coordinator gave me the phone numbers of the women who hadn’t made it and I called them. We let everyone know that all the women who wanted to be part of the project had to come to the Tumut Land Council, during that week as the LALC had given us rooms to record in.

Each woman had an appointment time. I’d phone them the day before to confirm their appointment and then on the day I’d call them in the morning. Just to make sure they had all the information they needed to participate. I phoned a small number of women who had initially shown interest, but hadn’t come in to record their story. That was on the Thursday, we just wanted to let them know we were heading out on Friday – so the opportunity would be over. One woman changed her mind about not participating and we ended up recording her late on the Thursday evening.
Berenice and Pamela's visit to Brungle & Tumut

We made two trips to Brungle and Tumut, the first was from the 14th to the 18th of May 2007, and the second was from the 26th to the 29th of May 2008. Dean Freeman, the Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer who initiated the Heritage book project for Brungle and Tumut agreed to act as our community contact. Dean let all of the women know that we were interested in hearing their feedback about the recording and publishing their stories. We received an invitation to meet everyone at the Brungle Health Centre. Most of the women who had participated in the book were able to attend. We met with a few women individually, who were not able to join the group discussion.

Summary of the feedback

A consistent theme in the feedback from the Elders is about having a voice that is recognisably theirs. Some of the Elders described the book as the beginning of that process. It was important to many of the women that the books are produced by Aboriginal people about Aboriginal people. This group of women described themselves as a generation who has two objectives in recording their oral histories. The first is to make the past known to the younger generations, because these Elders grew up in times when the past was not accessible. The second is to reclaim this history as the heritage of Aboriginal people, and for Aboriginal people to be seen by the wider society as the experts in their own heritage. The book has helped to unite a generation of women across the region. Several of the Elders talked about feeling moved when they attended the launch of the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Wagga Wagga book. The Elders also talked about the mostly positive impact that the book had on their relationships within the community and with their families.

The Elders have experienced increased recognition of themselves as knowledge holders. Locally, the newspaper showed interest in the stories and many of the Elders receive regular invitations to speak in schools and other forums about their lives and heritage. Charles Stuart University has also engaged with the women, recognising their expertise as story-tellers and Elders who are active in community development. Many of the women are enthusiastic about education, in all of its forms, and particularly in sharing the wisdom they have gained from lives as Aboriginal women. In particular, Phyllis Freeman and Sonia Piper spoke to us about their experiences of being invited to speak each year to school children on the topic of Aboriginal heritage.

Feedback from the story-tellers

**Margaret Berg**

Terrific! No one has done it before; it’s important. There hasn’t been nothing written about us Aboriginal people in our words. It is always someone speaking for us. We need to speak for ourselves. A lot of people from different cultures learnt from the book and more people not just Aboriginal but non-Aboriginal were looking for the book.

It’s ours. It is our story in our own words. There was a lot more that could have come out in the book, but there wasn’t the space.

Kath Schilling made people feel more relaxed. A lot of people give their opinions – she didn’t, she’s a terrific person. She made everyone feel comfortable with what she was saying. Because a lot of people didn’t want to let out their life history to just anyone. There are some people who don’t want to talk about their lives to be honest.

I don’t think any of those things came into my head. I seen the book that was done at Nambucca and I really enjoyed it, and one of the ladies that was in the book, she passed away soon after.
Dean asked if we wanted to be involved. Some people got involved and others changed their minds later. They were all asked. Some people said they weren’t, but they all were, they wanted to be in it later. Everyone that’s seen the book and heard of it, everyone wants a copy, not just Aboriginal people, and its white people also. They are asking Dean, when is our community getting asked? Dean, he wants to do a men’s book. They want to be fair and equal and give the men their say.

We went down to Wagga some of us for their launching of the book. Talk about movie stars! They were signing autographs in their books. We didn’t think to do that. To see some of the expressions on their faces – it was terrific.

I’d like a copy of the men’s one [Walgett & Collarenebri]. And even some of the ladies down the coast, some of their boys drove them up. When they got out the car – some of them were a bit shy – later everyone got to know one another and it was terrific. Whereas I knew most of the ladies did their book at Wagga.

I think because nothing’s been done much in the past about Aboriginal people. It’s very important to the Aboriginal people who are a little bit shy to bring them out in the open. Some of them could have books written?

Kath Schilling’s terrific, but I think Dean should be acknowledged for getting the funds to get the book written.

Sue Bulger

The Tumut Brungle book is recognised, celebrated, and it was great that it was written. It was great that each person had a different story to tell but still coming from the same area. The book is on Tumut Shire Council website and schools in this area looking for Aboriginal culture can use it. When I went to pick up my nephew, who goes to St Patrick’s school in Gundagai, the children in the infant department recognised me and said, ‘She’s out there, that’s her!’ as they had just looked up the book on the internet.

Phyllis Freeman

People go to Italians to find out about Italians. People go to Greeks to find out about Greeks. People go to white fellas to talk about Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people need to find out about each other. The books brought families together. As a healing process and now we are talking and listening to each other. Some families that haven’t spoken for a long time now do.

With the oral histories stories now being circulated in the libraries, schools, families, we are getting recognised wherever we go. We’re celebrities now! The Tumut Times paper was asked do an article on our stories; we were so honoured and so proud, we all went down the riverbank and told our stories and were so happy about it, thanks to the books.

It was my chance to put it out to others between the pages. Since that book every thing has gone on in leaps and bounds. One day on a coach a lot of Aboriginal ladies were travelling when someone passed the women’s heritage oral histories books from DECCW around for everyone to read about the other ladies from different communities that had done the oral histories with Kath.

The women all discussed what they had read and that they would like to do one from their own community. To share their knowledge and stories and how proud they’d be. The stories need to be told they said, as Aboriginal people weren’t able to speak freely about their stories or anything.

To tell their own journeys. In my day it was to be seen and not heard by government. To be able to tell a story and to have it in a book would make our people proud. It would have been good if this would have been done a long time ago. As a lot of the old people who are gone now, we don’t have their stories to pass on. The stories they could have shared. We have got the opportunity to share and talk without getting into trouble.

It gave power to the people who shared their stories. Being a grandmother my grandparents didn’t talk. I want my family to know and to share and learn from their cultural heritage. We all waited for the time and now the chains are broken we can talk from our hearts. We couldn’t before because of the authority figure. When we went to the book launch at Wagga we were so proud to see the other ladies sign their autographs on their books. We heard them say no one ever wanted us to sign our names like this before. We were so proud of them, it made me cry.

Winnie Marlowe

It is very important to tell our stories. We weren’t allowed to be telling anything to anyone and a lot of generations missed out on a lot of the stories and their understanding of their cultural heritage. This book gave us the right to do our ways, our way of thinking.

We weren’t allowed to speak up in the past. Aboriginal people couldn’t speak because we would be punished. We all now have a sense of real pride, a sense of identity, it’s a teaching lesson for all of us; it gave us our strength and spirit. Don’t tell us any more about us, let us tell you.

A lot of women now are having a sense of identity. Now the women are doing Welcome to Country, as before they thought they didn’t have a voice. Now they do and proud of it.

Sonia Piper & Elva Russell

It’s a wonderful thing to have our say as we lost a lot of our cultural heritage. We were too scared to tell our stories because of welfare. We were suffering silently. A lot of the stories are gone; welfare did a lot of that, and government. There was a big response about the book; more people wanted to know where they could get it.

Now our kids can learn. Everyone wanted to know more things. It needs to be done. The seed is planted. Charles Stuart University has asked us to talk as a model for oral history. Mother and father have gone, they were too scared to tell. My eldest daughter [Elva’s] was proud of our cultural and heritage.

Laurel Robson

I value the information given out in the book and the joy it brings to everyone including myself. Education is important to everyone, I felt it was great. But I was a bit embarrassed when Pam asked to take my photo that day. I wasn’t prepared for that. After it was all over, it was all coming back to me I had photos of the Hollywood Mission I could have used. I could have recorded my story all over again.

I’m happy with the book and I am proud to have had the opportunity to record my story because it is something I have wanted to do for many years.
I started school at Yass when I was eight years of age. And I did like school. I was never embarrassed of my culture I just thought I was the same as everybody else, Mum and Dad taught us children to be that way. When my cousin Charlie Bell started school I was so pleased, because we were close mates. Word got out that we could sing. So the teacher would take us and we would sing from class to class, I love my singing and I’m still singing to this day. I sing at the nursing home to the elderly patients. I’ve won a few trophies for my singing.

I was never embarrassed that I was Aboriginal. This girl used to call me ‘black’ and I was really upset by that. I waited for her behind the war memorial and I jumped out and told her, ‘I’m sick of you calling me black and I don’t like your colour either’, and I pulled her plait. Funny thing is we became friendly after that. That was the first time I reacted.

My husband, the children and I decided to move back to Tumut from Wagga in 1985. And I wasn’t interested in working at the time. My sister used to get Home Care and they were short of staff, she gave my phone number to a lovely lady called Shirley Bond (she was Indigenous and she was the Service Coordinator at Home Care at the time) My sister told Shirley about my years of experience working in hospitals from Yass to Melbourne, and Melbourne to Tumut. I then worked with Shirley as a cleaner for 12 months and she taught me a lot of things. I was so heartbroken when I received the phone call that she had passed away, she was a lovely lady. When Shirley passed away, they had no one to replace her to do that work, they asked me if I’d like to do the office work just for a little while. I said I had no experience doing office work but I would try. So I did both jobs, cleaning and service coordinator for about 6 months, then I gave up the field staff work and stayed working in the office up until 1994. Then I retired.

When I retired I fretted to go back to work, because I missed the people you get to see, like my friends, my customers both Indigenous and non-Indigenous as well as my relatives in Brungle and Tumut. Six months later I saw a position available in the paper doing personal care and respite care. I thought ‘this will suit me perfectly’ because I am experienced in that field. The interview was at the Tumut hospital and there was 20 people interviewed. I got the shock of my life because I won the position.

I’m a cleaner at the TAFE. I was so pleased to be working in the TAFE College library one morning because me niece was looking on internet and she said ‘Aunty Laurel I found you on the internet’ and I was surprised because I didn’t know I was on the internet in the Tumut and Brungle book.

There is so much to learn from the past, to the present, and for the future. I recorded the oral history for the next generation and for the future, not just my children but for everyone.

My story was more from Tumut than Yass. I never visited Brungle when I was young because I lived on the Hollywood Mission. When the story about the book came out in the paper, people were thinking that I came from Brungle. The first time I saw Brungle was back in about 1964. I was born in Yass and Darbalara was as close as I got to Brungle. I used to cry to go with my Dad when he worked at Darbalara. Years later we were driving along that same road, you see because of a road accident we took it as a shortcut, my nephew knew the way to go through Darbalara. I hadn’t seen it since I was a little girl. It was amazing for me to see the Murrumbidgee River. It was emotional and exciting for me to see where we used to camp as children. It brought back beautiful memories. One particular memory was of my cousin Charlie and I being sent to the shop to buy tobacco. Well we did but when we got back Charlie’s Dad wasn’t pleased because we bought the wrong one, so we had to go back to the shop.

On the Hollywood Mission we lived in this little three bedroom house with a covered in veranda. The house had these thick wooden windows, when they were closed the house was so dark. Sometimes we’d run out of water, you’d go out to the well and it would be completely dry, but at least there were a few taps on the Mission so we could get water there.

Sadly, I’m not in the photo of everyone because it was taken at Christmas time at the Yass mission and I went away to Cootamundra with my Aunty. Mum, Dad and the younger kids came to Melbourne to visit, while they were away the house at Yass burnt down and we lost all the photos of our younger days.

There were 14 children in our family. All the girls’ names begin with “L” and all the boys’ with “R”. They used to say it was for love and romance. Our parents were always going for a walk by the river with a rolled up blanket. I was 12 years old and had no idea why! We live our culture every day of our life.

Tammy Tidmarsh

Above: The mural in the shopping centre at Tumut created by local school children. Photo courtesy Berenice Carrington
I got my roster and my first customer was a [lady] who’d moved to Tumut from Sydney. I couldn’t find her place – the street had all different numbers. I found her address and I was breathless from searching when she opened the door, I was apologising for being late. She looked me up and down and I felt so uncomfortable. I said ‘I’m from Home Care, sorry I’m late this is my first day and it was hard to find you house number’ then she said, ‘Why would you type of people want to come into our home?’ And I said, ‘Because I’m here to give you care, if you don’t think you need my care I can leave right now but I can see you need my assistance. Who is going to look after you tonight and over the weekend?’ As I was leaving she called me back. When I told them about it back at the Home Care on the Monday I cried, but I was determined not to let her beat me. I ended up continuing to care for her for quite a while.

Tammy Tidmarsh

It would be really good to bring together all the women who have told their stories in these books. Even though all our stories are different we have things in common and some of us are probably related.

I have given copies of the book to nine or ten non-Indigenous people: they hunger for knowledge of the book. Friends of mine at Gundagai High School downloaded it. I got to go to Wreck Bay: a mob down there did their own stories.

Everyday life is a learning experience. We live our culture every day of our life. There is always something I am doing with my culture in it. Even talking to my grandson. I am very proud of who I am, where I came from and what I am.

After the book there was nothing but positive feedback. I’ve had friends wanting copies, saying they realised we lived hard lives, but no idea how hard. I’ve actually gone into the schools and told stories from that book. It was also an advertisement for my artwork.

Other memories have come back all the time. There’s always something that comes out. I get very taken in when I’m painting – remembering family that have passed away brings me closer to them in my heart. I tend to reflect on my family that’s passed a lot.

We can pick up books from all over the world and read about those places, but you can’t go into a book shop and pick up a book like ours - unless you are a famous author, but not the little people. I think the little people like us have got to be heard. The Indigenous people of this country are not the only ones who have had hard lives, but Indigenous people are still doing it tough, if you know what I mean.

I told them not to change my words and they wrote exactly as I said it. I’m me. I don’t like to paint myself higher than anyone else. The good thing about this is that there’s a mob of women round here who don’t see each other. It’s not easy to sit down and have a yarn up. It’s not bringing us together in person, but it’s bringing us together in yarn up in the book.

It’s important to realise not everyone can get together. The people that are still together, they need to reunite and catch up on each others lives. Every time I go to a funeral in the Indigenous community we say, ‘We’ll get together, we’ll get together’, but the next time you do is at another funeral.

I’ve been writing a lot of poetry. Never in my life have I been writing poetry. I wrote a beautiful poem for my niece. Mary Williams

The book is for everyone to learn. I’m very proud of the book. Brungle is our life and soul. I wasn’t going to do it in the first place, but I wanted to tell a story about my mother. I was close to my dad. I just wanted to talk about her, because there was nobody to talk to about her. I was with her every step of the way and I knew what she lived through. Years later she said, ‘It wasn’t hard, you just did what you had to, to survive’.

I’m very proud of that book. [Someone] had a go at me about it. [They] said, ‘I’m going to read it because I want to see if you have put things in there that I don’t agree with and I’ll sue you’. I said to [them], ‘How do you know if it’s not right? It’s my story’.

The girls (my younger sisters) are pretty happy with the book. They did say, ‘Why didn’t they come and see me and record my story?’ I know Dean went and visited everyone and gave them the opportunity. I said to them, ‘You might have an opportunity in the future’. There was a lot of backlash from the other women about not having the opportunity. But you can always do another book.

Nan reared my elder brother and the sister next to me (that was just the way in the family when it was too much for your parents). She would have lots of stories to tell about Nan and Aunty Lil. Dad used to train Brumbies, my brothers would know about that. Nan married
a Scotsman and lived up here in Tumut. When I was talking about her in the book the white people who knew her started to ask, ‘Was that your Grandmother – Kathleen Little?’

That book is our stories from the forty and fifty year olds. I reckon it would be good to get the younger people to record their stories now, to compare it with how times have changed. But I bet the loving and the giving won’t have changed. They’d probably say they are shamed, but it’s just a word now, they don’t know what it was like to be really shamed. They call it ‘gweenda’ now. They say ‘gweenda’ all the time.

I write the way I talk. I won’t lose my language. I won’t change my way of talking. We are not going to get a life if we have to keep defending ourselves. Communication is a big let down for a lot of people. If they can’t communicate, it makes them feel sick. My husband goes to the doctor and he doesn’t understand what he’s been told and it affects his wellbeing. He doesn’t know what the pills are for. A lot of Aboriginal people can communicate with other people, but they can’t understand what is coming back to them.

When I was a teacher some people would say to me, ‘I can’t understand what you are saying’, and I would just say back to them, ‘Go and ask someone else to explain it to you’. I want to go and do environmental studies at Tranby. I look at the dam up there where Mum and Dad used to fish and they’d be so unhappy to see how the environment is changed. We left Brungle in 1965, but we kept coming back for Christmas and New Year. We’d go to the river or sometimes up to the Dam. I want to do environmental studies so I can speak their language.

Dean Freeman

They see that book as one of the most positive outcomes and the work they got out of it. Aunty Soni, three years ago wouldn’t have spoken in public, now look at her.
Chapter 7: Port Stephens feedback
Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Port Stephens book

Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Port Stephens is the fifth in the Heritage Series. Six Aboriginal women from the Port Stephens region of New South Wales recorded their stories for the book. Their stories centre on Karuah and Soldiers Point.

A concern for the future of the marine environment is a common theme in the book by the Port Stephens women. It is filled with stories about Aboriginal people who depended on the sea and coastal landscape for their livelihood. The women describe their ongoing connection to a heritage of fishing, natural resource gathering and detailed knowledge of the coastal landscape. As with other women in the Heritage Series who have published their oral histories, the threat of the Aborigines Welfare Board is a feature of some of their stories. There are tales of childhoods spent outdoors, playing with friends and helping their parents with chores. Common values also bind the stories together, each woman tells of her love for her family, respect for her Elders and pride in her heritage.

Below are Kath Schilling’s recollections of collaborating with the community to produce Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Port Stephens:

The Port Stephens book followed Brungle & Tumut. It was a real advantage that I knew nothing about fishing. Warren [Mayers, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer] was to introduce me to the community and he had already lined up women for me to talk to who wanted to be part of the book.

There are not a lot of women in that book, but you have to say that what is there is huge and really worthwhile. Carol I knew from the family history unit [at AIATSIS]. For a period of about eight years Carol would ring me up with a name to research - we were actually feeling joy when we found someone and grieving when we lost someone - via the phone. One name would be a child and we’d find out that they died on such and such a date, another time we’d find a name by going through a sibling’s record.

Berenice and Pamela’s visit to Port Stephens

We visited Port Stephens from the 14th to the 16th of April 2008. Pamela had spoken on the phone to many of the women who had recorded their oral histories in the Port Stephens book. When we decided that we should visit the communities in person, Pamela rang some of the women who she had previously spoken to and discussed our idea of a visit with them. We received a positive response and so we made arrangements with each Elder to visit her in her home.

Summary of the feedback

A common theme that arose during the conversations that we had with the Elders in Port Stephens was the meaning of their attachment to the region. There is a high degree of Aboriginal involvement in the management of National Parks around Port Stephens, including a co-management arrangement for Stockton Bight and the recently declared marine park.

For these women, notions of identity and attachment operate on several levels, for example, historical affiliations with Aboriginal reserves, qualifying as Traditional Owners under various legislation, and involvement in Local Land Councils. All of the women that we spoke to held a similar point of view that the Women’s Heritage book that they had produced together stood outside of any legal terms of reference regarding the right to speak for Country.

Carol Ridgeway Bissett comments specifically in her feedback about the ambiguous status of local Aboriginal heritage that she sees being created by including in the book Aboriginal women who are descendents of the traditional owners of the area and...
Aboriginal women who are not. The striking feature about the Port Stephens women’s feedback is how each Elder occupies a distinctive, strong and active role which involves her heritage. This suggests that there are a growing range of opportunities and contexts in which to contribute Aboriginal history and Aboriginal traditional knowledge to management of heritage in Port Stephens. The Heritage book appears to have successfully combined a complex range of approaches to heritage. The book has been popular in the region and most of the Elders spoke about the active role that they have played in promoting it as an educational resource.

Viola Brown suggests a future for the Heritage Series which involves publishing books on traditional knowledge about practical things, information that would be useful to a person of any background living in Australia, and combining the books with culture camps, where people learn how to apply the knowledge. Carol Ridgeway Bissett makes general recommendations for ways in which DECCW could facilitate increased control of heritage by Aboriginal people.

Feedback from the story-tellers:

Viola Brown

Teaching culture is our role and that’s what we do. Teach the young ones their Aboriginality. The way to identify traditional owners is at a big meeting, people agree with that; you need the genealogies.

Twenty years ago I started recording genealogies. I wanted to get our own together and Carol had come back from South Australia. Mum was Yorta Yorta and Dad was from around here. Twenty years ago I went to get “Kitty” Lewis, my great great grandmother. She was born in the 1830s in something I found at the State Library. I was looking up missions.

You have to be patient. If you are not interested just leave it alone, I’ve got friends who are Ridgeways, we’ve got three separate groups – none of us are related. And I’ve just found a fourth.

Stockton Bight is one big midden; they’ve finally admitted it. The bay used to be dry – full of middens and burials etc. The first thing National Parks should have done was close it off to vehicles. We found one body, ground to smithereens.

Our way of life is a simple way of life that other nationalities have grown out of and they find it hard to come back to, simple. They are personal stories [in the Port Stephens book] and they don’t go outside those stories. When you are talking about Aboriginal stuff it’s hard for white people to understand. The books are easy for them to understand, because they are about people. White people find Aboriginal culture hard to understand.

I think you should link the books to real life experience to teach people about culture.

If you had these types of books on Aboriginal housing, the tools and how they were made, because there’s a lot of them; another one on foods. I contributed to that architect’s research on Aboriginal housing – that was through Newcastle University you know that the Melaleuca is waterproof – that would help people survive in the bush. Get these old people that still know and teach; black or white – it’s the only way we are going to integrate. Have a weekend camp on how to build or how to do basket weaving.

Few Aboriginal people can understand the white way of schooling. They are used to being taught by being shown how to do something. That is the way they need it.

Bev Manton

This is a special place that we have here. We make it special through our strength and we get that strength through keeping our heritage and history alive.

There was a good response to the book. I think that more events are ensuring that Aboriginal people are giving themselves permission to do things – the doors are opening.

Since the time of recording my story in the heritage booklet I have been actively pursuing State and Federal government to establish an Aboriginal heritage commission in NSW. Further to that, NSWALC has contributed a major submission to the new cultural and heritage Bill. We are hoping to get some wins there.

Val Merrick

The book made a big difference: I gave one to the Taniba Bay School. The head master was that thrilled when I sent the book in for the library, he sent it back to me to present at the school presentation day. A lot of the mothers asked me if I had any more at the school presentation day. After that people were asking me everywhere for these books and I said, I haven’t got any. It’s been a great tool for them at the school; made more respect for the Aboriginals through it. Just in a book like that it’s made them think differently about us.

The [Awabakal Learning] Centre gave their one copy of the Port Stephen’s oral history to the prison. For them to have the book might make a big difference when they see some of the stories they maybe haven’t experienced.

I’d like to see more women involved. We didn’t think it would turn out like this. I suggest if it happens again, go to the women you missed out on. One of the women missed out, she’s my sister-in-law, and she was really cranky she wasn’t invited. This woman is not normally interested in what we are doing, so you sort of miss her out, we didn’t think she’d be interested.
I was a bit hesitant doing it. It took Kath a couple of times with me. When I think of anything, I think of the past – it was really difficult doing that book. But, it made me feel better about myself, because of the response I’ve had from the white community. Because my husband is not Indigenous I went through a lot with it. All my grandkids have all got one that they put away. My son spoke about it, they all loved it.

I’m wearing two hats. I’m a Traditional Owner. Also a board member for Stockton Bight. I’m also on the board of the Land Council, it makes it a bit hard because of also fighting for things for the Land Council.

Last year at Murrook, we had our first Corroboree. The guys that did it used to do them up past Cessnock. We had a couple of hundred there. We all came away saying how much better we felt about ourselves. We had a sausage sizzle, and boys done their Corroboree – they came from all over NSW.

A lot of people reading the book means that they are getting educated about the local stories of the Kooris. The old memories and feelings that came to me made me stronger and proud.

Colleen Perry

The kids know my background, the stories of how we lived in the old days. A lot of people wouldn’t like to live the way we did, but we had no choice because money was so scarce. They were better days than now and then we were happier.

Carol Ridgeway Bissett

Although the book was called Port Stephens it was not clear if it was about Country or about women who just happen to live here – this has caused a lot of confusion and misrepresentation. I think we should have a book about the traditional knowledge of this area and the people from this Country.

The correct way to read oral histories is as just as that person’s story. People from the missions are trying to claim identity of place and that when they are not from here. Aren’t they proud of the nation they come from? One thing and I think my family agrees with me, when you tell things that are traditional and you write them down, you have got other people using your knowledge for their benefit. People want to deny that a mission is where they put people from all different areas. And they people from the missions are claiming our Country as their own, because they don’t know any tradition or law from here.

Doing the book didn’t change my relationships with anyone. I’m a real community person. I get real involved in the community. I get primary, high school, and Uni students coming to me for information. I get other people sent to me because I know a lot about plants and local Aboriginal history and culture.

I’ve been involved in Aboriginal gardens. Since 1988 I’ve been slogging away to record plant uses and the Kattang language. These days I see myself as an activist, environmentalist, historian and researcher as well as a consultant.

I was involved in putting together information about Aboriginal natural resources for the Kempsey Aboriginal College. I chose not to renew my CMA [Catchment Management Authority] membership as part of the Aboriginal committee ACEN because I felt that we weren’t given the opportunity to deal with different issues that the CMA dealt with and that we were a tokenistic group of Aboriginal people.

I’ve been quiet for a number of years due to my commitments to Soldiers Point/Salamander Tidy Towns, Landcare and the Mambo/Wanda Wetlands 355B committee which I am a member of. Since I’ve been involved with both groups they’ve won a number of environmental and heritage awards. Wanda Wetlands is an Aboriginal women’s sacred place, however National Parks put male Rangers in charge of this site, without finding out from the Aboriginal community if that was the proper thing to do according to traditional lore/law and culture. When I asked them how they could protect this site through a National Parks and Wildlife Service Agreement, they replied that it was at the bottom of their list.

I was worried about Soldier’s Point/Salamander Tidy Towns and Landcare, and Mambo/Wanda Wetlands [with] non-Indigenous people doing land rehabilitation and destroying Aboriginal cultural landscapes. Through educating members of [the public] I find non-Indigenous people and to a certain extent other Aboriginal people know very little about Aboriginal people, their culture, history and heritage. I view myself as an Aboriginal community educator. For over 20 years I’ve been involved in the environmental movement to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, the environment and flora and fauna species and their habitats. Sometimes I’ve been a guest lecturer, public speaker, tour guide or Aboriginal activist. I’m a firm believer in social justice and equality for everyone. I ensure that I set aside time for anyone that wants to talk to me about Aboriginal issues, the environment, species and natural resources. I love my traditional land. When you see people destroying our land, culture and heritage, it really hurts.

My family and myself’s recommendations for the Fern Bay housing development was to ensure any artefacts and human remains were reburied in an area set aside for that purpose, inform National Parks and Wildlife and register the site. The developers were going to give them to the Lands Council. If developers go on destroying local heritage there will be nothing left. Its time to avoid areas where Aboriginal heritage. I view myself as an Aboriginal community educator. For over 20 years I’ve been involved in the environmental movement to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, the environment and flora and fauna species and their habitats. Sometimes I’ve been a guest lecturer, public speaker, tour guide or Aboriginal activist. I’m a firm believer in social justice and equality for everyone. I ensure that I set aside time for anyone that wants to talk to me about Aboriginal issues, the environment, species and natural resources. I love my traditional land. When you see people destroying our land, culture and heritage, it really hurts.

In the early 1990s I was asked by the Newcastle Greens to speak at International Environment Day. I was so nervous! It was the first time that I’d spoken in public. That was the moment that set me on the road to be a public speaker and Aboriginal activist. Since then I’ve spoken on a number of occasions at public rallies, TAFE, schools, WEA, university and community events. The highlight of my life was representing...
the city of Newcastle with a lecturer from Newcastle University at the International Pathways to Sustainability Conference in Newcastle. Imagine me a local Aboriginal woman asked to participate in a panel of public speakers which involved a well-known person called Edward de Bono.

Recommendations:
- Cut out the middle men and women in cultural heritage assessment and consultation processes – approach Aboriginal people with knowledge directly – middle men and women like the anthropologists used by Registrar of Traditional Owners at DAA to compile genealogies and other historical material to determine who is a Traditional Owner and who isn’t.
- Pay Aboriginal people; you shouldn’t be expecting their input for free. Agree on a contract, for example your knowledge is not put into a document that is public, but goes into a separate document that just goes to the project.

Gwen Russell (and Jamie Tarrant, Grandson)

My girls will pass on the heritage and learning from the book. My family asks for more stories. Now these stories are forever. It made me proud of my Koori background, my identity.

They give me two extra books. I give ‘em to my kids to put in the school library. They get sent to read them to find out about Koori things and that. One went to the high school and Jamie took one to the primary school. Put in them ‘donated by G Russell’. The different kids going home and telling their Mums they seen Mrs R’s write up in the book at school.

Every one liked them. You only tell the truth and what you can remember. I got good feedback from my family. At first I didn’t like the idea – these things are your own.

The old people didn’t tell us everything. We had to find out for ourselves. That’s why we don’t want to give our stories to everyone. You like to share it with the family. The girls said: ‘Don’t be so stupid Mum’. I thought, ‘Why share your life with everyone?’

My life is my own. You tell your own kids about it, that’s how I felt about my life. I’ve changed a lot in myself since those days. A lot of things I wouldn’t talk about then. I got involved in the land council. The original ones started it off in ’83. I was one of the founding members along with my husband.

I just love what’s going on – I put my two cents worth in. My Grandson (Jamie) is the chairperson. He’s keeping it in the Russell side. Andrew Smith is a very good man advising him.

Stockton Bight – finally got it finished last Friday. That’ll be a good thing to watch. The Message Stick people I was going off to them about that tin city. They asked me would I go and live there now? I said, ‘No; I would have a few years ago.’

Jamie arrives:

When the oral history came out it was in good time with negotiations that were going on for the Worimi Conservation lands out there. It was in the lead up to the negotiations and everything was quiet in the wider community (all the talks were behind closed doors) so there was a fear factor. The oral history was like a tool to start to break up the fear. With the land, the Elders didn’t want to offend anyone, it was all about reconciliation.

Sadly, since providing her feedback Gwen has passed away.

Jamie Tarrant

I think it was good; there is no other oral history document in Port Stephens. They are hungry for that. If Elders can’t physically give it up they can get it from the book. It’s good for the wider community too.

Colleen Perry’s story about being cut out from fishing – the new land owner excluding them – that brings tears to your eyes. It records that Aboriginal people did use to use these areas. When I was a kid growing up we had nothing – Nan said if you want a flag flying, do something about it.
Chapter 8: Bourke feedback
Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Bourke book

Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Bourke is the sixth in the Heritage Series. Ten Aboriginal women recorded their stories about their lives, experiences and the things that have been important to them about their heritage. The round of oral history recording that formed the Bourke Heritage books grew out of a report commissioned by the Western National Parks and Wildlife Service titled Wirringakulka Gurrulkily – Women of the Stone Country (2002).

The women telling their stories in this book are proud of their connections to the country and proud of the work they and their families have performed in it. It was their families who worked for the white settlers as they came in to take up the land. Their families saw the development and the wealth created through the use of their own labour. They saw their traditional lands fenced off and taken away. Now they would like their traditional and contemporary heritage acknowledged as they strive for cultural renewal.

Individual stories in this book describe the grandfather of several of the women, Sergeant Frank Williams, who was a black tracker stationed at Byrock. His children tell of his sacrifice to make a better life for them, but how in doing so he was forced to isolate them from their own extended Aboriginal families, from their language and from their heritage. Today his grandchildren embrace their heritage and feel a strong sense of attachment to the places of their ancestry and history.

Station work is a shared history for many of the women in this book. There are stories about being raised along the stock routes from Cunnamulla to Brewarrina. One woman tells about raising and educating her seven children on the properties her husband managed. Another woman tells about her love of fishing along the Darling River.

Below Kath Schilling recollects the process of collaborating with the community to produce the book:

Bob Sutherland approached me with a project that they had completed about the Byrock Water Holes. He felt that it needed some final editing to prepare it for publication. The Byrock history was really a record of the women’s stories about their grandmother. In particular, the history focussed on the suffering and hardship that the grandmother had endured.

I had two pieces of advice about the book. Firstly, I thought it was a shame that we did not have the stories of these women telling about their own lives. I suggested to Bob that the women should be approached to do their own story. Secondly, I was concerned by the emphasis on what happened to their mutual grandmother, told in each of the women’s stories in the Byrock history.

After we had agreed on an approach for refreshing the past oral history project in preparation for a fresh book, we contacted Phil Sullivan in the Bourke office. Phil put us in touch with some other women in Bourke who were also interested in recording their stories and we made the project different.

Because the first Byrock story had been three years in the making, I wanted to make sure that what I was proposing did not slow this publication down, so I spent three days in Bourke recollecting and collecting stories – very quick. Being there for such a short time meant that I didn’t have an association with any women similar to that of the other books.
Berenice and Pamela’s visit to Bourke

Our visit to Bourke took place between the 28th and 29th of April 2008. Phil Sullivan, the Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, acted as our community liaison. We spoke to Phil about our plan to meet with the Bourke ladies and he organised a place and time to get together in a group. A couple of the Elders were away from the community when we visited and so we followed up with them individually.

Summary of the feedback

While we were talking to the group several of the Elders spoke about feeling angry because, although the books had won a National Trust Heritage award, very little was being done by DECCW to continue to make copies of the Bourke book available. This particular group of Elders did not regard the free pdf versions of the Heritage Series that are available for download load from DECCW’s website as equal to the original printed and spiral bound books. Part of the problem is that few people in Bourke have access to a suitable computer and printer.

Other Elders that we spoke to, who had also told their stories in the book were enthusiastic about the book being available on the internet. For these women the increased awareness that this has created of the book and of their heritage has been a rewarding experience.

Feelings of pride and achievement flow through all of the feedback from the Elders in Bourke. Being involved in the books has acted as a channel for many of these Elders to release pent up emotions about their heritage. The book also inspired others to tell their story for the first time. The Elders have used the book to share their experience of how they grew up in their early childhood. To speak out, all of us, it was an effort for me and my people. I feel a loss to share my experience of how I grew up in my early childhood. To speak out, all of us, it was an effort for me and my people. I feel a loss in my heart. I grew up with my grandparents protected by white law. I couldn’t mix with Aboriginal people. I went to school; a French kid and said she couldn’t play with me as I have black blood. I went home and cut my arm, but my blood was red. I needed to tell my story.

Feedback from the story-tellers

Cecily Hampton

It made you feel proud of who you are. I’d like my grandchildren to remember who they are and what they are. My grandson asked me what should be put on his newborn’s birth certificate and I said, ‘They are Aboriginal, just like us’. The next generations are widening that bridge.

Kids don’t take it in when they are young. It’s going in one ear and out the other. When they get to 22 or 27 then they want to know. My grandson Dwayne is 27 and he’s just started to ask questions now. The others know, but it’s not registered with them yet.

Judy Harland

Now we are older we can talk about it. It hurt so much to grow up passing as a white; inside your Aboriginal heart was trapped. Now I’m getting older my skin is getting darker; I look Aboriginal. The book was well presented. I felt proud. I believe I took part because I wanted to share my experience of how I grew up in my early childhood. To speak out, all of us, it was an effort for me and my people. I feel a loss in my heart. I grew up with my grandparents protected by white law. The Byrock conditions [for employing her grandfather] meant we couldn’t mix with Aboriginal people. I went to school; a French kid and said she couldn’t play with me as I have black blood. I went home and cut my arm, but my blood was red. I needed to tell my story.

Dot Martin

Great, I wouldn’t have told my story if not for the Bourke book. There was positive feedback from my cousins, they even found it on the web. I would encourage Aboriginal people to tell their stories. It’s a lost art. History needs to be brought back to life.

Heather Mieni

They had a piece in the paper to say the book was launched, but nothing carried on that I know of after that. My kids just didn’t remember some of the things they found out in that book. Like being out on the river, they remembered it when they saw it. They really enjoyed it.

My niece Cheryl, her husband and children all found the book interesting, they live out from a place called Kings Creek near Wauchope. Seeing our heritage all started out at Gundabooka they are planning a trip out here to let the children discover where it all began. The husband has been to Gundabooka quite a few times in his line of work, and is quite interested in the area.

I have a granddaughter living in Young. After reading the book she was interested in finding out more by doing Aboriginal studies at school and came first the first year of study and since has gained good marks each year.

My cousin Albert, he cooked for Tranby, he’s seventy four now, he keeps saying he’s going to write a book.

It’s no good trying to push it on them; they have got to want to learn it. I would like my grandchildren to appreciate the way we are now and to always remember who they are and where they came from.

Caroline Ramharter

It felt good. It was great to tell the truth; even better when I signed the book. I felt like an author! You can download the book from the computer. I’ve got the photos from the book as my screen saver. I never thought that I would be in a book and now on the web. It’s fabulous. I thought the book would only be locally, then I heard ours was the best [the series of books won a NSW Heritage award]. Sad that mum died before the book. We came out of the woodwork.
Alma Jean Sullivan

They are leaving school and doing fishing, but they’ve got to have that schooling first. You never starve, that’s what kept me going all my life. Don’t forget the fishing! Get down there and throw a line.

Alma invited us to join her fishing down at the Weir after our talk with the ladies. The following are Pamela’s observations:

When Alma was fishing down at the weir at Bourke she was so at peace with the fishing line in her hand searching the flowing water for fish, telling her stories of the past and present. She was watching everyone fishing and looking at their catch of the day. When the river is healthy the people are healthy and happy.

Mary Sullivan

Sadly, Mary passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

June Smith

It felt real good; just today the teacher asked me if she could use my story from the book so the children can learn. The children saw the book; they were all excited and was real proud I was in it too. I want to teach how it was and the things that happened.

Doris Turner

I would like my grandkids to remember that we are all together and we are all the same. I was happy the story was to be told.

Pamela adds:

When we met with the Aunties at the Dubbo office with Phil Sullivan, Auntie Doris joined us on our trip to the weir or the Darling River for fishing. Auntie Doris sat in the back with me and shared her knowledge of the township.

When we arrived at the weir there were groups of Aboriginal families on both sides of the river fishing and children playing. Auntie Doris, who gave me permission to call her Aunt, said she hadn’t been down to the river for five years and was so happy to see the river flowing.

Sadly, since providing her feedback Doris has passed away.

Grace Williams

Sadly, Grace passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

24 These paragraphs about the stories in the book are quoted from the introduction to Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Bourke.

I would like my grandchildren to appreciate the way we are now and to always remember who they are and where they came from.

The late Doris Turner

Above: Melissa Prince’s daughter playing at the Byrock water hole. Photo courtesy of Berenice Carrington.
Chapter 9: Walgett & Collarenebri feedback
Regional profile

Walgett is over 690 kilometres from Sydney in the north-west of New South Wales at the junction of the Namoi and Barwon Rivers and at a junction between the Kamilaroi and Gwydir Highways. Walgett is situated on fertile, black soil plains. The district’s economic base incorporates the industries of agriculture, grazing, tourism and mining.

Walgett is one of the last major rural centres before the opal fields of Lightning Ridge, Grawin, Glengarry and Sheepyard. Collarenebri is 80 kilometres upstream from Walgett on the Barwon River.

At the time of the 2006 census the Indigenous population of Walgett was 822 or 47.4% of the total population of 1,735. The Indigenous population of Collarenebri was 201 or 42.1% of the total population of 478. The Indigenous population of Lightening Ridge was 554 or 21.3% of the total population of 2602.

Background to the Aboriginal Women’s Heritage:
Walgett & Collarenebri and Aboriginal Men’s Heritage: Walgett & Collarenebri books

The Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Walgett & Collarenebri and the Aboriginal Men’s Heritage: Walgett & Collarenebri books are the ninth and tenth in the Heritage Series. Twenty three women and seven men recorded their stories for the books. These books are a significant milestone in the Heritage Series because they were produced in partnership with the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) and linked to the anniversary celebrations of the Service. WAMS was successful in securing funding from the NSW Heritage, recognition of the significant worth of Aboriginal family and local history.

The Aboriginal histories of Walgett and Collarenebri that emerge from these collections of stories centre on the theme of the contribution that Aboriginal people made to the economic development of their region, the theme of gaining respect for Aboriginal people, the theme of heritage and culture, and the theme of their connections to Country. There are eye-witness accounts from those who participated in the Freedom rides that took place in 1965, as well as personal recollections of the experience of racist policies and practices that the campaign sought to address. The love of the environment in the region is told with a corresponding pride that the story-tellers have in their ability to survive and thrive in the extreme heat of summer, in drought conditions and in times of flood. When these story-tellers were young, access to transport was limited and relationships between Aboriginal people were subject to government control and so in the books we hear about the effort and ingenuity that the story-tellers made to get together regularly with family and friends even though they were often working and living in remote locations, or limited in the capacity to travel and socialise by other means. There are also stories about providing for their families and the social and community roles that many of the story-tellers have fulfilled.

The project spanned eleven months, beginning with a community briefing on the 17th of June 2005 for which Kath Schilling produced a promotional flyer that was distributed by WAMS and finishing with the 20 Years of Service celebration which occurred from the 10th to the 14th of April 2006. The WAMS Board of Directors was kept informed at their regular meetings of the various stages of progress with the project.
The linkage between health (in a holistic and wellbeing sense) and the recording and publication of the oral histories was achieved in two ways: initially in the planning for the project; and then later by the incorporation of the launch of the books with the 20 year anniversary of the formation of WAMS. Berenice attended the launch of the books and was able to speak informally to several of the story-tellers as well as to Christine Corby, the CEO of WAMS.

On that day, the main feeling that Berenice observed and heard about was one of excitement. People spoke of the books as an achievement and of the stories as precious knowledge to be passed on. The photographs illustrating each story were an instant talking point and the start of further exchanges of information between people. In an interview with Berenice, Kath Schilling recalled several conversations that she had with women at the book launch:

One woman told me, ‘The only way they (my grandchildren) are going to know me is through this book’. She has passed away now.

One of the conversations that Kath had on the day of the book launch are examples of how the experience of recording and publishing their histories has been deeply personal for the people of Walgett and Collarenebri.

The story-tellers each received personal copies of the books during the formal part of the proceedings. Afterwards, the guests could come to a table where Berenice was distributing extra copies of the books. Berenice noticed how people spent time just touching the books and admiring them. There was a sense of receiving into their hands something of immense value. Many of the people who were collecting books spontaneously told Berenice who they were intending to give them to. Berenice could see that the books on the table were regarded as gifts, the people who were clustering around had their own pre-determined ideas of the importance of the books, before they had read them, simply because of who had chosen to record their story in the book and the relationships that they had to those story-tellers.

The demand for the books did not flag at all and there has been a least one re-printing of the books since then.

Here are Kath Schilling’s recollections of the process of recording and publishing the books:

Bob Sutherland spoke to the Elders Group about two years before the project started. Two years later I was asked if I would come up to do an oral history workshop for the community, because they wanted to get an oral history project going. We went to the local club and decided we’d do an oral history workshop there and then.

WAMS organised two representatives from their Board of Directors, Mrs Thelma Thorne and Dulcie Dennis, to be the collaborators on the project. We organised a workshop, and contacted Thelma and Dulcie to invite participants. We put it all together, the catering, the materials and so on. I prepared a list of questions in advance to help people. Then I made templates for how the project would go and an agenda for the workshop. It was arranged that whoever wanted to do it would turn up at another local club on the day.

After the workshop, it was arranged for me to go up and spend ten days there. It had been arranged for two female staff from WAMS to do interviews with me. They turned out to be very productive days. After that things came to a stand still. So I contacted Phil Sullivan (Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, Bourke), because I had a good relationship with him and I asked him for help. He put me in touch with his Cousin, April Sullivan. I met with April and she was happy to work with me. April took me round and introduced me to people at Gingie and Namoi villages.

After that, we thought it might be nice to do a book on some of the men. One of the guys at WAMS lined up a few male volunteers. Aub Weatherall was recorded in the park. April Sullivan recorded a couple of stories and Aunt Thelma went with a WAMS staff member all the way to Lightning Ridge to record a couple of women.

People were coming to my motel room in the evenings and bringing their photos to have them scanned. It was quite a big project. I had people coming at night to say that they would like to be part of it. Some people that I’d recorded during the day would come in the evening to talk to me about adding to their story.

I had visited one lady at the Kensington hospital here in Sydney. She gave me her permission to publish her story after I had read it through for her. She knew that she was dying and knew that her story would give her grandchildren a chance to know her. She passed away not long after that visit. And another lady passed away before the book was published. But I had been able to see her in the Dubbo Base hospital before she passed. She was able to hear and read her story and she too gave me her permission to publish it.

Note that permission slips were filled in at the time of the interview, but I liked the permission reinforced at the time of the final story write up. This also gives the contributors or their families true control.

In each town I’d always visit the historical society and the local library to find out about the town and its people.

Berenice and Pamela’s visit to Walgett and Collarenebri

We visited Walgett, Collarenebri and Lightening Ridge from the 29th of April to the 2nd of May 2008. Pamela Young describes how we were invited to visit Walgett and Collarenebri:

The Walgett men’s book is the only book of men’s stories in the Heritage Series. After phone contact we were invited to The Dharriwaa Elders Mens Group. I spoke to Wendy Spencer, the coordinator of the Elders group, to arrange a meeting with the men as requested. I knew Wendy years ago, she was the woman who helped start my acting career making health videos about HIV at the Aboriginal Medical Service Redfern. She suggested she would discuss our visit with the group at their next meeting.

After we had received our invitation to visit Walgett, we contacted Phil Sullivan at the Bourke office and asked him to contact April Sullivan (whom Kath Schilling had recommended) to see if she was interested and if she would like to act as our community collaborator person. April was happy to do this, because she had worked on both of the Heritage books and knew the people who had participated in her community. Most of the men met with us at the Dharriwaa building to give us their feedback in a group. We met with the women in their homes or in other places where they agreed to talk to us. We didn’t catch up with everyone, but after returning to Sydney we did our best to follow through.
Summary of the feedback

There were some common themes that came out of the discussions that we had with Elders who had participated in the books. Publishing their stories in the book has been one way in which the participants can fulfil the responsibilities that they feel they have as Elders to their community.

The Elders spoke about their desire to share their stories with their families and the younger generations. Many of the Elders talked about ‘being seen and not heard’ as children and how this had made it difficult for them to find out about the past. However, many of them had learned many practical things from their parents and Elders and they wished for this knowledge to be shared with their community.

They were conscious of the value of the knowledge gained by their generation growing up as Aboriginal people during a different era to the one faced today by young Aboriginal people. The Elders wish to add to the resilience of this younger generation by giving them the benefit of their own experience of the types of hardships faced by Aboriginal people in our society. While the times may have changed, there are some enduring goals for the Walgett and Collarenebri Aboriginal communities that include achieving self-determination, managing Aboriginal culture and heritage in accordance with Aboriginal values and being proud descendents of the First People.

There were feelings that were also common to a lot of the story-tellers. Doing the book made people feel happy, good, satisfied, and proud. Many of the Elders told us too about how their families had felt when they were given a copy of the book or had read the stories. The most common feeling was happiness.

Although the experience of doing the book was generally a positive one for the story-tellers, the Elders highlighted the tension that occurs between recording and publishing an individual life story and participating in a large scale community based heritage project. The ways in which people described this tension ranged from ‘feeling rushed’ to ‘not telling the whole story’. Some of these tensions were perhaps due to the time and size constraints of each Heritage Series book. Several Elders have used the evaluation as an opportunity to correct mistakes which occurred in the transcription of their oral histories or to fill in omissions in their original stories. At the same time, the story-tellers that we spoke to, acknowledge that the benefit to the community of doing a collective heritage book was in recording people’s oral histories before certain Elders passed away.

It is evident from the number of people who spoke to us about having more stories to tell, or who told us about other community members who had expressed an interest in recording their oral histories, that there is the potential in the Walgett and Collarenebri community for more projects of this type. Feedback that we received from the Coordinator of the Dharrwa Elders Group reinforces this observation. The Coordinator highlighted the long standing oral history recording project that has been run by the Dharrwa Elders Group and suggested this expertise could be incorporated into future community heritage projects.

Themes for future oral history projects that have emerged from the feedback include a desire for a book on powerful Aboriginal women; an oral history of Aboriginal people’s ideas for the future; and a biography of a local well known Aboriginal police tracker. One woman that we spoke to at the Dharrwa Elders Group meeting also suggested linking together, in some sort of database, all of the oral histories that have been published in the Heritage Series.
Feedback from the story-tellers

Some story-tellers were unable to be contacted and we regret to have missed out on their contribution to this evaluation. Other story-tellers were contacted during Pamela and Berenice’s visits, however could not be contacted again to gain final approval for their input into this book. Where this follow-up was not successful the story-teller’s input has been included anonymously.

Unnamed Story-teller 3

They’ve mucked up a good story (mine), but the rest of the book is a great read.

Christine Corby

My family members contributed to these books (Thorne family). I am so proud of them. There was so much more I would have liked to mention so my children could have an understanding of why I chose to live in Walgett when many of my cousins moved on to further their careers and/or settle in other towns to start their families.

The one thing that I shall carry with me is that the majority of Aboriginal people, no matter where they live, will be pre-judged by others because of their skin colour. These books tell the stories of intelligent people, all of whom are ‘professors’ of their own personal and social knowledge. The stories are significant for the individual and their family for recording such valuable history, but more importantly, significantly, for providing the true history of how people were separated from mainstream Australia.

Thank you for allowing the locals to convey a positive image to our towns.

From a professional point of view, I am so pleased to have seen Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri promoted, the people being recognised for their strength during racist times, as well as their commitment to maintaining their families during a period of national poverty and depression.

WAMS found the entire project exciting. The launch was so emotional, but also so moving to have the opportunity to applaud our senior people, sharing their humour, and their ordeals of courage and bravery.

I agree that timing for the project was pushed for some of the people who wanted to move slowly into recapturing their life on record, to remember everything they wanted to without the stress of working to a deadline.

I hope that a second series of both male and female stories is published as many senior people in these communities have indicated their interest once the project commenced, and also after it was completed. The response to contribute to these books was overwhelming. Although some of the older people have now passed, their children have expressed an interest to contribute. Is that possible?

Daphne Kennedy

Got it all down in the book what we wanted to say. I felt alright [telling the story]. We are struggling on our pensions.

Daphne’s niece Diane Walford also contributed to the feedback:

I was offended with it at first. They only got paid $90: to record a life history story. For these Elders they lived the hard times; they struggled. You might have friction [with the feedback] – some of the Elders aren’t communicating. It was rushed. Mum did a clip out near Dungaleer, she did a CD. She knows every spot – the people who lived there. Youse might take them out and do a clip on them together. It’s good when they pass on because of the grandkids. I’ve been trying to get it out of Mum – the lingo and that, but she won’t tell me.

It is good ‘cause it goes down generation and generation. If no one starts doing anything it’s going to die out. A lot that have gone, have taken it to the grave with them. The evaluation is a good idea.

From left to right: Berenice and Debra Walford discussing the book; Dulcie Dennis and her sister Joyce; Fay Green and April Sullivan at the Tanilba Bay Public School; Fay Sands; and the late Hazel Winters and her granddaughters.
Debra Walford

Fantastic, the stories. It’s important to the facts that cultural heritage stories are restored in the community for the schools libraries and for the future generations. We revive and survive personal experiences. Many stories are still being told of the older days now for the nephews and nieces. My family would like more.

Before you go to the future we all need to go the grassroots of cultural heritage and always look after each other and be safe and strong. It’s a healing process. The children they are our future generation, they need to know their ground roots of existence. It’s a healing existence needed to break the vicious cycle. Share the knowledge we live. Females are the backbone of every family. It was very, very valuable. Cultural heritage is important to the journeys we have to re-live so others can learn the stories that need to be told. And it’s about us of today and the past and the present.

It’s been good. The thing that I really enjoyed about it for me is it’s there in print now. All the books are actually put into our schools so when the kids are doing an integrated unit on our community, well, they’ve got that book there as a guide. Not only that, they’ve got all the people in the community as a guide.

When they came out to Walgett and asked me to ‘T’ it up. A lot of them when they tell their families their stories they didn’t believe it, but when they’ve got it in print they start to believe. It’s a resource forever.

That book is not only about life experience. It’s about putting it in print and getting it out there and educating people in all society.

Doreen Hynch

Unfortunately we were unable to contact Doreen for her feedback during the period of our evaluation.

Dulcie Dennis

I was happy with the way it was done. I came here at two years of age. It isn’t the same as when you go to look up things in the archive. We didn’t know about Dad’s family. He never told us nothing about his family. Those days you were seen and not heard. Mum did our family tree before she died (made one for each of us), left it for Janice [Dulcie’s niece] to finish.

Eileen Peters

I felt good sharing my story. It was learning and educating. We had a short time to tell stories and I could tell more now. There are lessons to be taught. Time is so precious. The stories are like yesterday to me and I laughed and laughed looking back. I learnt discipline and to respect others. To the younger generation my advice would be, to be good, stay out of trouble, and live a good life.

Fay Green

I’ve got only one remark. I’ve got one daughter, Virginia Ann and I missed her out and mentioned all the boys. She said, ‘Haven’t you got one daughter?’ I felt terrible.

As far as the rest of the book and all the stories, they liked it. I was quite satisfied with the stories. There is a lot of things I told them not to put in the book and they did that.
Fay Sands

It felt good. I left my son’s name out of the book – Lionel is his name. It is very good, my grandkids thought it was great.

It was a bit rushed. I could think of more things. I could have put more in it after thinking about it now. I’ve never had feedback from the book. It would be good to have get togethers with the other women to discuss it.

Gladys Walford

We met Gladys on her way out of the house. Gladys was happy to stop and say a few words:

My kids liked it. Same, we all lived on the same land and all grew up, good people, good children. I was grateful to see my story in it.

Hazel Winters

It was good; everyone wanted the book. I shared them out. They all loved the book. They took a book each. Few more of them [Elders in the community] would like to tell their story. I had no trouble.

I was proud to tell my story to learn from the stories. Some didn’t know the stories. The community would have liked to have done more. My granddaughter in Queensland tells of the story of her grandfather now. Still, educating the young is a role model satisfaction.

Sadly, since giving us her feedback, Hazel has passed away.

Jenny Wright

Sadly, Jenny passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

Josie Thorne and Linda Hall

Josie: I felt good in doing it and it was interesting for my family; my younger girl didn’t remember a lot of things. It gave Aboriginal people a bigger voice. It was good to talk about the old times. I loved it and to teach the young ones. After I got home, actually, when this came out and I read it, I thought there were a few more things I could have said.

Family were happy with it. Some of it was new to them, some of it I did talk to them about.

Josie: We can stick our chest out now.

Linda: It was alright [pointing to Josie] – she’s more or less said it all.

Sad, since giving us her feedback, Linda has passed away.

Lola Dennis

I felt good about telling my story to Kath Schilling. She brought me a box of books down and they all got one each. It’s not really inspired anyone else to do their story. I’ve done them from Walgett. I’m from Brewarrina. Bre was beautiful in my day, it’s all changed. My cousin Lola Boney, she lived just over the levee. I feel the same as Lola Murray about finding out about the others.

A few might have went in it. A lot of them laugh at talking about older days. You tell ‘em today [about the past] and they laugh at the idea, they got easy life today, got education and that’s good for them.

Make headlines or something [with the evaluation] – I’m real proud of them [the books]. I think most them in Walgett like the other’s stories. There’s some good ones too.

Sadly, since giving us her feedback, Lola has passed away.
Lola Murray

I was happy. My family loved it. It’s important for my identity, my family wanted it and others; I had sent one to my sister in Mt Druitt. They were real happy about the book they kept it to show others. It was educational and I felt real well. Everyone was proud.

It felt good talking to them. I still fish; the river’s getting pretty low now. If you catch a big one on the line, they cut your finger. You’ve got to put a band aid round (to protect the finger). My son took one down there and he read it. My sister took two down to Sydney, the men’s one and the women’s one. They was real good. No problem with it being new (experience to record her story), hah we just sat in the park with April and that there.

I read the book. I got to know a few – these people – I didn’t even know they lived there at Gingie before my time.

Mary Creighton

Sadly, Mary passed away before we had a chance to contact her.

Noreen Kennedy

I enjoyed the book. Yes it was good! The kids wouldn’t know what to do... they never done things like we did.

Rose Fernando

The first part of this feedback was recorded during a phone conversation between Pamela Young and Rose Fernando. Later, when we met Rose, she wanted it to be understood that some of her feelings had changed. Rose explains why.

Telephone feedback: It was hard for me. The tapes invaded the old ways, people of today should listen, only chance to listen. I wasn’t impressed with how cut short a lot of words were in the book. Time is a factor and it never shows much of a person. You can’t talk about your life in five questions. We were raised that everyone made time for everyone’s story, to listen to the pain and the laughter and it was shared.

Face to face feedback: There has got to be respect taught for the books. It hurt me at NAIDOC when I’m telling my story and the kids they flick through the book ahead of me and say, ‘Auntie, what about this and what about that’, before you’ve got to that part of your story – they are racing on ahead. That’s what I mean about people should listen first.

If people don’t learn to listen they’d read this (the book) as if there is nothing between the lines – like you taking this back and saying, ‘this is what Aunt said’, but if you sat on that couch you’d get more – you’d have what is between the lines.

Pamela rang me the day after I found out it was terminal. (Rose had cancer.) My daughter made damper and I made curry sausage. My granddaughter made me want to pass it on. On that day you rang Pamela, I was not ready to talk.

It was done too fast, it takes old people a lot of time to speak about the past. The books didn’t represent us properly; didn’t tell the whole story. We need that for the younger ones. That’s the only thing about the book I wasn’t happy with. But then, some of them has passed on, and their stories are recorded for the next generations. I don’t have the time now to record my life in a book, that’s why I’m concentrating on speaking. I’m just passing it onto my family now.

The book: I liked it in one way, but I don’t like it in another way. Because for a long time I’ve wanted a book on powerful Aboriginal women, but I haven’t got anyone onto it. The Maoris have got one. Sadly, since giving us her feedback, Rose has passed away.
Thelma Thorne

It got a good response. The books are good for the Europeans. The books were sent to Brisbane library. I read them and I believe I felt a lot more and it opened up a lot of people. A lot of doors were opened because the mobs got together and talked up. I thought the best part brought us women together as we were born different places. The more we talked, the more we wanted to talk. My boys listen to my brother share his knowledge. I would have liked more time to yarn. In my time we were seen and not heard, it stopped a lot of stories. Us as kids growing up weren’t able to say too much. Now try and stop us!

This is our life. Well, you don’t make up stories about your family or your past. Well, it’s part of your living. This was lovely too, it was excellent. You’ve been round to the Elders. Old George Rose asked me, ‘How come they didn’t ask everyone?’ I said, ‘Because officially it was supposed to be on the women, ’til the men butted in’. Now they’ve got their own book. He has passed on now, George Rose.

The saddest thing about it is there were all these things we said and done that could have been put in the book. We all had fun doing it, I can say that. It was a rush job though. Not only myself saying that, a lot of the other ladies been saying it too at the time.

They say this is the biggest one. Well, we all want to get into it in Walgett! And this little one here did good too [Thelma pointing to April].

My advice to any communities wanting to do their own book is that they need more time than us. You know ours was all done down at the sporting club in one day. They gave us a couple of days notice. All the little tape recorders weren’t working. They worked their butts off. You have to explain that if you can’t scribe, get someone in our family that can sit with you.

There’s a lot that can’t read and write. Bring it down to our words. A lot of us are too proud to ask, what was that about? I’ll speak up and say, ‘Youse are using corrugated iron words – bring it down to our level (I’ve had 29 years working in the schools).’ This is my advice to other communities, don’t be proud. You don’t need brains, all you need is understanding. Tell ‘em that, say you’ve talked to the men and women of Walgett!

Our two books are in the library in Brisbane, because my daughter-in-law had two and showed them to her sister. She doesn’t understand Aboriginal people at all. I said to Viv, ‘Don’t worry I’ve got two here, I’ll send them to her’. I think she works in the hospital: it’s in the library there.

They didn’t believe about Aboriginal people until that book was put in her face [daughter-in-law’s sister]; it’s proved how wrong we can be. If she’s just one person who thinks like that, how many more people are there?

Dot is my first cousin. Her father and my mother married brothers and sisters. We’ve just celebrated our 54th anniversary, Dot celebrates her’s in December. I’ll tell you a story. A couple of my husband’s nephews, he took ‘em to La Pa [La Perouse]. They wanted a drink of water [scooped up in hands], salty! So they walked up further to get clear water, as far as Yarra Bay, they were not going to get a drink of water! Cause they were from the rivers they didn’t know about salt water.

Thelma starts laughing.
Men's Feedback

Aubrey Weatherall

I felt good about the stories in the book; some people said, ‘Why you said that for in the book?’ I said, ‘I liked it, that’s my story’. Since then, now I talk to a young fella from university and he comes and he records my stories. We go down the river and yarn up; he said he uses it for his studies and that it can help educate the gubbas about us. I enjoy doing it as in the old days the Aboriginal people couldn’t speak. A lot of non-Aboriginal people commented on the book. But I’m proud of it.

Harry Hall

There were a lot of the ideas from my mother’s and father’s stories. I would have liked to have a longer time but it was a short time to record. The truth is from our people it’s from our hearts. Who was the cause of this? We never had a chance from day one, our life was planned by the white people from England; the Queen Victoria. Get the authenticity from the Aboriginal people not the white man who had nothing to do with Aboriginal people’s lives. I knew what Aboriginal people went through; the Freedom Ride, I was there. I’ll never give up to the end. What things should change so it would make things better? If Aboriginal kids could read about their own people equal to reading about white colonisation.

Aboriginal leaders should have their own picture of history; filling in the frame of history, it’s better for Aboriginal people to tell their own stories of their own cultural heritage. I was one of the men that were with the group of the Freedom Ride and to encounter the racism first hand in these country areas. To this day I am still fighting for justice of our people today.

Keith Dennis

It was good. The book was really good. The family really loved it. I got a lot of feedback – my sisters loved it. I’m a man of a few words.

Lewis Beale

Most of the feedback was positive, the Elders were fascinated about the stories; even the non-Aboriginal people. There’s a need for more interviews for Aboriginal people. They need to get on the map and they need a National Aboriginal council.

Some of the fellas went into remission after they did their stories; they get frustrated to think that they maybe done something wrong. When other community members read it they did question why we spoke up. But we were proud to do it, but I couldn’t tell about my dad’s story as Dad always said that it was bad.

Most of the things I said are from the heart. In general it’s a good book to put the way we lived. Most of the feedback was positive. Our sense of humour is a bit hard but the hardships kept us close together. It brought us harmony.

They learnt to control the children different because of the government. It’s a message for the younger ones to learn about our past. Children are easily led these days, they need guidance. If we can tell our stories, our children will learn. The grandfathers and the grandmothers, they were our saviours.

We needed more time for the interviews. My voice was too soft at times, that sort of deterred me to tell more of my story (sort of shamed me a bit). We will always wear the scars, don’t trust the white man. We’re reaching out to other people’s hearts and of the past.

Second interview with Lewis

There are some things that I have to correct. I never worked at Roma, I’ve been through there. The place where I worked was called Walma, it’s 5 kilometres on the Mercadool Road. I said I used to go fishing with my grandmother and they didn’t put that in there. She never come home without bringing a feed of fish home – cod, yellow belly, black brim, bony brim, cat fish. We don’t see many cat fish now; very rare now if you ever catch a black brim, cat fish or boney brim.

The other thing we used to do was catch fresh water eel. Grandmother never worried about them because they looked too much like snakes. We used to catch black water snakes – they had the yellow belly with the red spots. They can grow up to six feet. A lot of people, I’m telling you, they never believe me.

When we used to pull them out of the river we used to cut the line, because they swallow the hook. Turtles used to be in abundance, platypus and river rats. When I see things the way they are now it makes me want to sit down and cry. We used to do a lot of what they call bobby fishing, short line on a long rod. Mum would carry all the fish. Those old people could do things we only dream about.

I think people pre-judge you. There was a couple came from Sydney not long ago and I said to them, ‘Walgett is a town where you get to talk to people.’ There’s no way of just running in and running out – that’s no way to communicate with people.

The other thing I don’t see anymore is the black duck. The brown duck and the teal duck are down in number. The galahs are down in numbers and the crows.

The native bee, they are cutting the trees down and they’ve got no where to go. The water hen, I haven’t seen one of those for a long time, they live around the swamp, they’re grey in colour.

Our moral oral history is second to none. Because the first lot that were put out if they weren’t up to standard. I got a lot of feedback on my little bit of the story, they said everything come from the heart, it wasn’t fabricated.

I had a white uncle-in-law, he knew everything about our culture like us. He even spoke language – it’s a dying art. My old uncle on my mother’s side – Archie Walford, he was an encyclopaedia of Aboriginal knowledge.

Goanna, when the snake bites him, goes and finds a grass as natural antidote to the poison; the brown snake bite. I can remember back years ago, if the horse got cut they used to have this pergasol and bathe it and people used to use it on their horse for disinfectant, they used to sell it in 4 gallon drums. I used to bathe horses myself when they used to get cut.

I rode a horse in from out of town for 14 years before I got my first licence. They were good times.

The people drive through; they should stop and talk to the people. You don’t come to see a town, you come to see the people. An old lady across the road here she used to say, ‘you don’t come to see what someone’s got, you come to see them’, and I always remember that.

Today it’s a different bonding. People today are inclined to say, I was talking to so and so today and I heard so and so are in hospital sick, I’ll say, ‘Give them a call’, and they’ll say, ‘Oh, I haven’t spoken to them for some time, so I won’t’, and that’s wrong.

They are reluctant to do it. They all come at a rush and somehow they lost that dignity to tell their story.

I think people pre-judge you. There was a couple came from Sydney not long ago and I said to them, ‘Walgett is a town where you get to talk to people.’ There’s no way of just running in and running out – that’s no way to communicate with people.
What a small town like Walgett wants is the industry, but where do you start? What is it?

Sometimes people work in silence, you can see it on their faces and they are political, but they can't bring it out – that's not only with Aboriginal people, that's with whites as well. They are reluctant in coming forward with what they want to express. I think it's something within themselves, it's how they feel, it's how they deal with it.

A lot of people have come to the Dharriwaa Elders and got a lot of information and never come back. At least you have come back.

**Phillip (Loppy) Kennedy**

Pamela had a phone number for Loppy but couldn't contact him. Loppy's cousin was one of the people Pamela spoke to while looking for Loppy and volunteered his feedback on his cousin's story:

It was good. I enjoyed the book and had a good yarn; other people enjoying it and remembering. The young generation should learn about where we come from and our history and what we are about. It's important because it gives the old people a voice for the younger generation.

**Ray (Guddu) Shepherd**

Unfortunately we were unable to contact Ray for his feedback during the period of our evaluation.

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**Additional feedback from the Dharriwaa Elders group**

**Tim:** The past is past, it's 40 years ago, you can't change what happened. It's the same story with different names, so and so who jumped the boundary fence and had a fight with the police. What about the future? You decide for us? The young ones, it's time for them to get involved. What do they think? What do they know? Why can't we have an oral history of the future?

**A woman who was also a guest at the meeting:** Link all the oral histories.

**The late Hazel Winters:** I was so surprised to have some men tell their stories, it was really good.

25 The logistics of working on such a large scale and to align the publication date with a significant community event may also have contributed to the feeling of being rushed.

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In the next chapter we read about the thoughts of DECCW Aboriginal staff, on what wellbeing means to them, and how they support the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities in the work that they do as government employees.
Chapter 10: Our Words

DECCW Aboriginal staff perspectives on wellbeing
“We have to think about our own wellbeing, otherwise we can’t contribute.”

The idea that Aboriginal communities benefit from recording and publishing oral histories is linked to the notion of enhancement of wellbeing. Recording stories is a way of preserving and sharing aspects of their culture and heritage which in turn produces positive outcomes. The quote at the start of this chapter is from a participant at a workshop on wellbeing with Aboriginal staff at which I was a presenter. I like this quote because it shows that there is a link between how someone feels and what they are capable of contributing.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain ideas about wellbeing and Aboriginal cultural heritage from the perspectives of DECCW Aboriginal staff. These perspectives are helpful because they include understandings gained from working as public servants coupled with personal knowledge and experience as members of Aboriginal communities. My colleagues’ personal and professional expertise provided Pamela and I with insights that greatly helped us to introduce this topic to the women and men we spoke to in communities about the Heritage Series books.

Kath Schilling describes the link between identity and participation and wellbeing:

What you are really talking about is a communal setting of wellbeing. As the individual goes forward they get the momentum from their social setting.

Kath understands that wellbeing is a word that describes something in the positive. Kath points to the positive contribution that an Aboriginal person’s social setting can provide to them.

Rebecca Simon articulates in detail the issues surrounding participation as an Aboriginal person in wider society, through work and within her own community and culture:

It comes back to wellbeing – you can be very well set in your sense of yourself and who you are and where you come from and things like that – and if you put that person in a government position and they have difficulty with literacy and numeracy then that sense of who they are and where they come from is just going to go to next to nothing.

Who I am in the organisation, my cultural knowledge and my identity, establish the respect and authority that I might expect from other Aboriginal people.

For me cultural knowledge is all about knowing who I am and where I fit into my cultural life, which is my family life, and where we go to engage in our culture. And it’s all to do with them... and there’s still that great big silence. So that knowledge, whether it’s passed down to me, or not, how do I know from the two or three Elders that are around who are they giving it to and how is it going to filter out? ...It comes back to the [fact that the] information holders still have control and they decide.

And what scares me quite a bit is that for a lot of them still, the stuff’s either too painful for them to talk about, even trying to get family history of stuff like that, or it’s a lot easier for them to talk about it to people they don’t know. So... when people go out to collect information, it will be rattled off quite quickly about family history (and they won’t give everything), but even stuff that I was reading in that Biamanga book was stuff that I hadn’t heard from within the family before.

It’s like the benefit, but also the downfall, to stuff being kept from you... Like I appreciate the fact that my family have never put any of the horrible things that they have had to go through onto us children, although, at the same time, I get upset about it because I think that’s stuff that I’d like to know, so that I can understand where they are coming from. But, equally, I appreciate that fact that they have never made their issues, and what they had to experience, ours.

So it is almost like in their transmission they are transmitting to us the values of family and social life and connecting that... to our culture rather than thinking, let’s go back to 70 years ago when we were fighting just to be recognised, just to live. And we have got that recognition now, and they have lost a lot of their knowledge of cultural practices, but where they’ve increased their participation and active roles in their own lives is in making the family and the kin connections the most important.

...if you don’t have the knowledge or you are not being provided with the knowledge of that part of the culture then you don’t have the means to go out and practice it. I can go and practice another group’s culture that’s been able to be enriched and stay very much a part of their lives but I’m not practising what I consider to be my culture.
It comes back to this need for Aboriginal people to understand that we are never going to escape being recognised as one group of people and that has power to it and we should be using that more because it is powerful. But then, the way that we’ve articulated who we are, we’ve changed tack and gone back and said, ‘we are all unique’, which is essentially right, but the overarching principles and values are the same. But it’s just relevant to different areas and there generally will be flexibility about how they actually go out and practice, and today it’s very much based on family groups, it’s not based so much on traditional land although you still have those connections.

It’s all the people. It’s like for me, if I said, ‘my community’. When I’m talking about La Perouse, I’m telling you about the Aboriginal community up there and I’m talking about the non-Aboriginal community as well. Many of the Aboriginal people that are married up there are married to non-Aboriginal people and so you can’t discount them from the Aboriginal community...

Below: DECCW Aboriginal Network Members
If I did that I’d separate myself from my mother and my mother’s heritage, and I’d never do that in a million years. She’d shoot me if I did because the importance of that heritage – from being with my Dad for so long and getting her head around Aboriginal stuff – it’s given her a different perspective about her own family history. Mum’s family come from a family of jockeys; there are Afghans, English, and Japanese. So it’s a very Aussie family. I think... they travelled a bit because of the horses.

I have quoted Rebecca at length because her words show that she lives in a complex place in which heritage is essential to her sense of self and capacity to act in the world, but at the same time her access to certain parts of her heritage is limited by the actions of her own community, as well as by the wider society.

In the second paragraph Rebecca talks about how it is her cultural knowledge and family history that largely determines the nature of her relationships with other Aboriginal staff in the organisation, rather than the particular departmental role that she performs. It is her cultural background that accords her the respect of her Aboriginal colleagues and therefore the influence that she can exercise in her departmental role.

In the third paragraph, Rebecca describes the paradox that exists for her regarding her cultural background. Rebecca’s family life largely constitutes her cultural life. It is a living heritage: an oral tradition, yet this includes a ‘great big silence’, the veil drawn by her Elders over some of the hardships that they and their predecessors endured. Moreover, Rebecca touches on cultural protocol that positions her as a passive receiver of this heritage, it is not something that she can ask for. ‘how do I know from the two or three Elders that are around who are they giving it to and how is it going to filter out? … It comes back to the information holders still have control and they decide.’

In the third last paragraph, Rebecca makes a statement about the loss of political influence by Aboriginal people in Australia that she perceives has occurred as a consequence of Aboriginal societies asserting their cultural independence from each other. Rebecca aspires to see the values shared by Aboriginal people unify Aboriginal societies.

The idea that wellbeing is affected by the degree to which a member of a particular society is able to participate in the culture of their society is well illustrated by looking at Rebecca’s experience of her identity and heritage.

The protective ‘silence’ that Rebecca refers to, which is practiced by the older generation, isolates her to some degree from direct transmission of stories about the past from her Elders. The impact of research is keenly felt by Rebecca too; her Elders will speak at length about their personal histories to an interviewer which she then has to read in order to find out some of her family history. Yet, she knows, from the behaviour and words of her community that family history and relationships have become the main way in which Aboriginal people experience their connections to their heritage.

So while Rebecca knows that she is highly valued by her Aboriginal relatives, this does not always translate into receiving comprehensive information about the Aboriginal history and heritage of her family. Rather, her family has sought to protect her from the painful aspects of their heritage by not telling her about some of the things they have been through. We see further dimensions in Rebecca’s experience of her place in the world, in her account of the respect that she shows to her mother’s non-Aboriginal history and her perception of her community as being made up of everyone who is within the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relatives. In this context, popular expectations that Aboriginal identity is exclusively about a genetic inheritance, would contradict Rebecca’s experience of the Aboriginal identity that she shares with her whole family.

Gavin Andrews’ situates the idea of identity in terms concerned with fundamental aspects of being human, and the role that identity plays in relation to wellbeing within this frame of humanity.

There are two sole possessions that cannot be taken from you (but you can give them away): One, your name (who you are) and you can choose to relinquish your identity; and two, knowledge (your beliefs are your knowledge and you derive your beliefs from your understanding of the world). For an Aboriginal person, if they choose to identify as Aboriginal, this identity is key to their sense of completeness.

Gavin’s description of identity focuses on participation, one has an imposed external identity as an Aboriginal person, but choosing to identify with one’s Aboriginality invests this identity with agency. Such personal acceptance of this identity and putting it to use, results in the sort of wellbeing that Gavin describes.

Mark Simon spoke to me about how it has affected him to combine his identity as an Aboriginal person with a role as a DECCW Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer:

My vision, so to speak, is changed. I wanted to try to get a hold of more of my culture than when I was growing up. I took this job to learn, I didn’t grow up in my culture. I was proud of my identity. But at school I was the only one in my year: one or two would come and go. Everywhere I go I get, ‘i’m your cousin’ … that is the good thing about being Aboriginal. They always ask, ‘Where you from? Where’s your mob?’

It’s been three years since I started this job and it’s been a real eye opener. I never realised that there was so much out there. There are so many things to see and learn about close to home that I didn’t know about. Like Hill 60, Coomaditchie (the mission), and the Escarpment.

I’ve got more out of this job than I expected. It’s getting me closer to working with the community and getting me involved – which I never had before. When I was growing up I was kept away from the politics and in-fighting. Dad and Mum did get involved when they first came down from Taree but then they backed away because they didn’t want to get involved with all the in-fighting within the community.

Some people had things taken away from them in the early years. Getting it back now has got to them. They are not ready to share it around. A new relationship has to be formed with the community and DECCW. The advantage of not being involved with the community when I was younger is that now in consultations people don’t see me as taking sides.

It gives me a lot of satisfaction when I do achieve things. Especially when I’m going out to record sites. And when I find a new one that people didn’t know was there, I feel good. When I find something, it’s being able to go to the community – feeling proud with yourself because you have achieved something.

Cultural renewal, that’s what I can see, not that it was ever dead, but bringing it back to the young ones today. Getting more traditional things known. Getting more for the younger ones like me.
Mark’s sense of completeness has been enhanced through his professional role providing him with the opportunity to learn more about the Aboriginal heritage of the area where he lives. So that, while knowing who he is and where he comes from have been important foundations to his sense of pride in his Aboriginal identity, the unexpected bonus of forging links with the Aboriginal community has given him considerable satisfaction. When Mark talks about the aspects of his job that make him feel good, they are the things that he is able to do for the community, like recording sites and being able to ‘see’ the landscape through Aboriginal eyes.

Mark is clearly articulating the two aspects of humanity described by Gavin as essential to wellbeing; identity and knowledge. Rebecca and Mark are members of the younger generations of their families and their words show us something of the determination that they have to participate as Aboriginal people in social and cultural worlds which they have found themselves in.

Mark mentions community politics and the tensions that the community is experiencing as a consequence of having their heritage returned to them. He implies that there is a connection between the current relationship between DECCW and the community and the tensions it is experiencing. Mark is concerned with the ways in which relationships between DECCW and communities can have an impact on the community’s internal relations. This is an important point. Rebecca spoke about how the procedures associated with the Biamanga Gulaga hand back affected her. Here, Mark touches on changes that occur within Aboriginal communities after the return of heritage and how the community could benefit from a greater responsiveness by DECCW to such internal change.

In contrast to Mark, whose job has increased his access to cultural knowledge, Cheryl Brown’s cultural knowledge got her started on a career path:

I grew up living my culture and heritage. It was not something extra that I had to learn about. I started out working with the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation. I was 30 when I decided that I wanted to get involved in research work. I was at Yarrawarra for eight years. Dee Murphy was my mentor. I worked quite a lot with her. I learned a lot about stuff I didn’t know about – knowledge that she’d picked up through her work. It opened up my eyes.
I learned about issues from the past: the tension between archaeology and local knowledge. I was a bit naïve at first. A lot of the early projects that I worked on were to build relationships between those different areas: local knowledge and archaeology.

My kids are used to me working from when they were young. It’s been a bit of a struggle. There’s lots of good things about coming from a community. My children belong to a family and a place. But they didn’t make a lot of friends from outside the family; they’ve got their cousins and so on. Coming to Sydney has been really hard for them. I want them to be more capable for making friends and being around different people. Because when they go out to work they are going to need that skill.

There are lots of influences living in the same community: good and bad. Being career minded I want my kids to have that as well. Sometimes they cop it... you only recognise it when you have got kids growing up in that situation. It makes me think about how my parents were with it all.

My parents always supported us. You learn by your mistakes; they were big believers in that. Still to this day they won’t step in unless they think you’re going to harm yourself. They have been supporting us all the way to do what we think is right. It’s something I instil in the children. You can’t be with them 24 hours a day. They’ve got to make their own decisions in life and live with the consequences and fix it themselves.

Cheryl’s story gives us a different perspective on the challenges of participation that Rebecca and Mark have spoken about. Although Cheryl is a member of the generation above Rebecca and Mark, and Cheryl has considerable cultural knowledge, she has also learnt to live both within and outside of her community in order to broaden the scope of her and her children’s participation in society.

Graham Moore is also a member of the generation above Rebecca and Mark. Graham sees his identification with his role as an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer as being an important factor in his wellbeing:

My personal wellbeing in the Service is about the [Aboriginal] Network. I feel happiest with the men, with everyone around me. I have asked for a men’s health camp to be run in the region. Primarily for staff, for men who have experienced racism. I do this job because it is my skin. It is who I am, like the chook [lyrebird] on the NPWS logo.

When you start the journey culture-wise the Elders are there to set you on the right path.

The chook is a communicator and that is what I am. It’s my people, my country, and my grandmother’s place/country. I’d happily just spend all day in the bush. But it extracts things from me.

I have the opportunity to keep learning and discovering. For example, I’ve just spent the whole day with a sewerage bloke to get them to see through my eyes.

I look back at the culture camps I’ve done with satisfaction. I get a lot of joy when a kid in the street flags me down and says, “Uncle, remember me?” The culture camps and courses are draining when you’ve done it. But it’s a great satisfaction that people are still ringing you up two years later. Relationships are key to wellbeing.

Graham’s phrase, ‘to see through my eyes’ shows the gulf in perception that he experiences between the way he looks at the world and experiences it and the way in which people without that knowledge perceive it. Rebecca, Mark, Cheryl and Graham have all talked about what motivates them as individuals to contribute to the conservation of the heritage of Aboriginal communities. While their comments about wellbeing may be seen as specialised because they all work for DECCW, each one of them has a clear sense of themselves as an Aboriginal person who has links to particular Aboriginal communities. Their accounts highlight to some degree the benefits that Aboriginal people can gain from active involvement in the conservation of Aboriginal heritage.

Christian Hampson is aware that tensions exist for Aboriginal people who choose to work for the government, and that there are particular issues for Aboriginal people working in the area of Aboriginal heritage conservation:

Our staff have emotional attachments to their work, as well as a sense of responsibility coming from working for a government department. This sense of responsibility is not always well received by the community. [Talking about wellbeing] is an opportunity for our staff to reflect on why they got into cultural heritage: how to be emotionally open to the type of work that we do. We could have taken jobs in housing for example, to help our people, but we chose this work in cultural heritage. These issues are something our staff have always known about, but not talked about.
Glen and Robert give us a sense of the personal and emotional dynamics that often accompany working in government heritage conservation roles as Aboriginal people. In the following quote, Kath adds to this picture with her description of the responsibility she felt toward working on heritage, knowing people had emotional attachments to it:

When I was doing the oral history books, people trusted me with these really emotional things and then I’d be coming back into this office with all this fluffy stuff happening around me. I had to really centre my relationship on my computer. It was never picked up on that I was dealing with these lives; being entrusted with these stories that I might have an emotional response to and how it might turn out.

Kath’s comment is illustrative of a keenly felt sense of responsibility for the integrity of Aboriginal cultural material within the setting of a government office. Assisting Aboriginal communities to conserve their spoken heritage included, for Kath, providing and maintaining a respectful environment for the stories at all times. Robert also touches on this point, highlighting a struggle between bureaucratic and Aboriginal community approaches and the conservation of Aboriginal heritage:

...there is a whole infrastructure built around having a bureaucracy manage Aboriginal heritage and there’s a lot been invested in that, so when you are looking at things from the community’s point of view, a lot of the time you are coming up against that infrastructure. That bureaucracy has to have its role, even if that role is redundant for a lot of things, and the community want to have back that control.

The particular emotional attachments that Christian described above, are here given a depth of meaning. We can see that Aboriginal staff are personally affected by the heritage that they are brought into contact with in their work, and that they encounter and manage conflict between differing systems of values, and between government responsibilities for Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal community aspirations for greater involvement in the management of their heritage.

Consideration of the emotions that accompany conservation of Aboriginal heritage as well as the Aboriginal social values that support the ways in which these staff work with community and with government, helps us to see how wellbeing is an integral aspect of Aboriginal culture and heritage. The issues that these Aboriginal staff have highlighted are about how they can achieve and maintain a meaningful cultural context in all that they do in their roles as conservers of Aboriginal heritage.

The wellbeing that Aboriginal staff have talked about so far incorporates an ethical sense of how they wish to conduct themselves in relation to Aboriginal heritage. Gavin made this central to his personal description of wellbeing:

You can measure wellbeing against any number of secular things, for example education, but to me it’s about whether I like myself as a person. All the rest is circumstantial and they will have varying influences on whether I like myself as a person. Repetitive negatives are what make you dislike yourself… Wellbeing should be about coming to realise your worth as a human being… Once you know your worth you are a well being.

Gavin’s description of wellbeing consciously ties together self respect for his existence as an Aboriginal man and the capacity that this gives him for action. Pamela Young describes her sense of wellbeing in detail:

Wellbeing for me is: being accepted as part of a community, the feeling of belonging; being treated like a human being; a desire for connection to Country; blackness, not as a skin colour, it’s about a spirit within; and expression of my creativity.

The ethical dimension in Pamela’s description centres around the value that she places on ‘being treated like a human being’. Pamela makes a personal description of wellbeing that foregrounds key elements of her identity-making: her heritage, her cultural expression and her access to Aboriginal social worlds. It is an identity that she respects, and one which, importantly, places her on an equal footing with any other ‘human being’. In this sense Pamela sets out the ethical basis on which she rests her identity.

Pamela and Gavin both centre their descriptions of wellbeing on a sense of self as an Aboriginal person that is positive. Pamela, like Gavin, recognises a link between what an Aboriginal person does and how they subsequently feel about themselves:

If you are comfortable with what you are doing, the respect is there for yourself. But it’s a long journey to get to wellbeing. I think a lot of Aboriginal people are disillusioned with what they are supposed to be.

Wellbeing takes you on your journey to find yourself. When you have your wellbeing everything changes and you can have relationships with others. And whatever that may be physical and spiritual, because in that way it has more of an expanding social connection and it makes you a bigger person than what you thought you were. If people see that, it allows them to have that expansion with you, not away from you.

In making a link between doing and being, Pamela describes personal wellbeing as something that is gained from respecting her own Aboriginality and which expands the potential for her to have worthwhile connections with others.
Wellbeing is about the future. It is how you can talk about the past and accept how it fits into today’s world. The Elders recording their stories in the oral histories, they accept the past and so future generations can accept it too. The Elders are filling in the missing links from the past, present and the future. Like a boomerang – you throw and it comes back, everything is connecting around so – all the generations can see themselves as being part of that loop. Being of the same world, one blood, one people. Lots of people don’t know what respect means. When you come to wellbeing, respect is so needed. One respects one’s self and others and that is the boomerang effect.

For Pamela, talking in terms of wellbeing shifts the focus away from separating out different parts of someone’s existence and talking about them in isolation from each other to talking about how things are if they are looked at all together. By linking the idea of wellbeing to heritage we can gain a broader perspective on heritage. It is no longer just about what has been retained from the past, but also about the capacity of Aboriginal people to see each other as participating in a cultural world in which there is shared Aboriginal heritage.

Pamela returned to her idea of the cultural role that wellbeing plays in heritage (the boomerang that connects and reveals everyone to everyone else) in later conversation:

When you say wellbeing, that’s a relationship to a human being; a person; a living identity. And that takes it to another level. the level of heritage and the oldest living culture in the world. We, Aboriginal people, are human beings with all these connections to heritage and culture.

Pamela’s description of the link between contemporary Aboriginal people and their heritage as a long lasting living culture shows the importance that public acknowledgement of this link has for her. It resonates with Kath’s earlier comments about the positive and generative ways in which Aboriginal communities can be a source of linkage between heritage and identity. This linking of heritage with identity has been a feature of the Heritage books, because they have been used by participants to celebrate their contemporary histories of family, work and attachments to places and to whole landscapes as living heritage. To them, this contemporary heritage is equal in value to the heritage that remains from pre-settlement times (such as rock art).

Experiencing life as physically and spiritually connected to the bush is something David Wright spoke about:

I am very confident to go out bush with my spirituality… the bush will either heal you or kill you. Protecting yourself gives you a sense of wellbeing. Self wellbeing is taught, you get taught to read the signs; safety and security comes from knowing what’s there to harm you and what’s not; instead of wandering around in a daze all the time.

David’s description of the difference between knowing and ignorance emphasises the sensory deprivation of not knowing, wandering around in a daze” David’s account of his own wellbeing comes across as a story about becoming alive. Learning to take care of himself in the bush gives him the ‘well being’ that Gavin described earlier.

Not all of the Aboriginal staff who volunteered to participate in the wellbeing project made their contribution through interviews. Some people preferred to convey their understanding of wellbeing in a practical way. Peter Peckham and John Shipp took me on a field trip to show me the Country that they feel speaks for them as Aboriginal men.

On the outskirts of Dubbo, John turned to me and said, ‘This is where our wellbeing starts’ and Peter pointed to the 100km/hour signs which mark the city limits. Driving through the Pilliga to Coonabarabran and back, Peter and John voiced their biographies and those of their relatives and friends, as landmarks came into view or as we detoured off into the bush to locate the markers for these personal histories. For example, Peter stopped by the Pilliga Cemetery to show me the row of headstones made by a local Aboriginal man for previously unmarked Aboriginal graves. John pulled over at the side of a long stretch of road and pointed to a scarred tree he’d initialled a few years earlier, when he’d brought some youngsters out on a culture camp and taught them how to cut a Coolamon from the tree.

David Wright, Peter Peckham and John Shipp describe understandings of wellbeing that are felt. Their wellbeing comes to them when they are in the bush or on Country and it includes a spiritual dimension.
Resilience is when adversity is flung at you and wellbeing is the way you handle it. For the Aboriginal staff who participated in the workshop where I recorded this quote about resilience; wellbeing is the quality of life that they are capable of creating. These staff saw themselves as agents of wellbeing, wellbeing that is achieved in spite of adversity.

A common thread that emerges from the descriptions of wellbeing in this chapter is that in terms of Aboriginal heritage, wellbeing is a positive experience of one’s self as an Aboriginal person. From this perspective, Aboriginal identity can be seen as the heritage of individuals. This has the potential to include them in the collective cultural worlds of Aboriginal societies whilst also situating them in relation to other societies in Australia. It is also an identity that connects them to Country and to the bush; landscapes that are their vast repositories of knowledge, history and heritage.

Aboriginality is an identity that has a resilient side to it, and identifying as an Aboriginal person has an independent benefit for individual wellbeing. Gavin spoke about identity being something that cannot easily be taken from someone. The speakers in this chapter also discussed the factors that can reduce people’s capacity to gain wellbeing from their identity as an Aboriginal person.

Gavin also described how self respect can be worn away by constant encounters with negative portrayals of Aboriginality (one’s own and that of others). Pamela referred to the disillusionment expressed by Aboriginal people she had spoken to, about what they are supposed to be. In sum, these limitations of the expression of identity are examples of external social factors that can reduce the capacity of Aboriginal people to participate in broader Australian society.

Wellbeing is a desire for connection to Country

Left: ‘Protecting yourself gives you a sense of wellbeing.’ David Wright
What do DECCW and Aboriginal people hold in common regarding Aboriginal heritage, and how does this form the basis for productive relationships between DECCW and Aboriginal communities?

Productive relationships are forged if they are grounded in commonality. Land is at the core of DECCW’s engagement with Aboriginal communities. DECCW manages eight percent of NSW in a reserve system as well as exercising protection under the National Parks and Wildlife Act for all sites and places of significance to Aboriginal people regardless of land tenure. Further, ten (as of 28/04/09) of NSW national parks have been returned to their traditional Aboriginal owners by Acts of Parliament and are leased by DECCW and jointly managed by the traditional owners and DECCW.42

DECCW is involved in a range of natural resource management programs, partnerships with Catchment Management Authorities (CMA’s), and climate change initiatives; all of which have existing programs, or the potential for programs, that are responsive to the holistic approaches advocated by Aboriginal people for management of and custodianship of Country.

DECCW and Aboriginal communities have a common interest in the management of the environment as interdependent systems of human and natural values.43 While they might have this interest in common, the approaches of DECCW and Aboriginal communities may not always coincide. For example, earlier in the chapter Robert spoke about the tensions that he perceived to exist between the bureaucratic infrastructure that has been developed and sustained by government to manage heritage and the desire of Aboriginal communities to regain control of their heritage.

Mark observed that there was a need for a ‘new relationship’ to be formed between the Aboriginal communities in the Illawarra and DECCW. While he described a particular locale, Mark’s point highlights the dynamic nature of DECCW and Aboriginal community relations; in particular, the potential for both positive and negative impacts of external bureaucratic infrastructure on the internal workings of Aboriginal communities.

A significant part of DECCW’s capacity to initiate and sustain its relationships with Aboriginal communities lies in the ability of its staff to understand the perspectives of Aboriginal people. In contrast, Aboriginal communities rely on their spokespeople to have accurate knowledge of the workings of government departments.44 Aboriginal roles, such as the ones occupied by the speakers in this chapter, not only form a bridge between Aboriginal communities within a region but also between those communities and DECCW.

Graham observes that, ‘relationships are key to wellbeing’. These relationship ‘bridges’, however, can require a great deal from the Aboriginal men and women who facilitate them. Graham talks about how his role as a communicator ‘extracts things’ from him. The culture camps and courses that Graham conducts leave him feeling drained, however he also speaks about the satisfaction that he feels when people remain in touch with him long after their initial contact.

Glen’s comment that people in identified positions are put there to do a job that cannot be done by non Aboriginal people problematises the role of identity in Aboriginal heritage management. The prerequisite of Aboriginality gives these workers the capacity to address contradictions that are inherent to government management of Aboriginal heritage.

Aboriginal heritage is intrinsic to Aboriginal identity. Further, this chapter has also described how an active role in one’s identity as an Aboriginal person contributes to one’s wellbeing. Thus, the inherent contradiction for government management of Aboriginal heritage encapsulated in Glen’s comment is that DECCW manages something that is intrinsic to Aboriginal people’s identities, and to their quality of life, and which cannot be reduced solely to a material form.

Consideration of the inherent contradiction for government involvement in the management of Aboriginal heritage raises a question about the things that form the basis of the relationships between DECCW and Aboriginal communities. How does DECCW gain the capacity to perceive and negotiate conflicting values and beliefs and how is this capacity enhanced by the Aboriginal staff who work in identified positions?
Workshop Participant, Community and Operations Branch (formerly Aboriginal Heritage Operations Branch [AHOB]) 2008 Annual Conference, Country, Culture and Heritage Division (CCHD), DECCW.

These outcomes are highlighted in the preceding community feedback chapters and also in the conclusion.

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Gavin Andrews is Manager, Cultural Programs Support, CCHD, DECCW.

Mark Simon is Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, Central Region, COB, CCHD, DECCW.

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Workshop Participant, AHOB 2008 Annual Conference, CCHD, DECCW.

For more information about Aboriginal co-management of national parks go to www.environment.nsw.gov.au


Right: Peter Peckham (on the right) and John Shipp (on the left) on the drive out to Country. Both these photos are courtesy of Berenice Carrington.
This concluding chapter summarises the main themes that have emerged from our conversations with participants in the Heritage Series and Aboriginal staff of DECCW. I then set the findings of the Heritage Series evaluation explicitly within a community development framework that provides an enduring way of articulating the value of the Heritage books across evolving government policy and changing planning documents.

A few pages out of each Elders’ Life

This book opened with the launch of the *Aboriginal Men and Women’s Heritage: Eurobodalla* book. The depth of meaning that this book had for the community was revealed through the formal speeches and in conversations that we had with people afterwards.

The Eurobodalla Aboriginal Advisory Committee’s decision to develop the Heritage book, focussing on family histories, reflected the story-tellers’ and their families’ desire for a highly visible and portable representation of their affiliations. The commitment by so many members of the community to make the book happen created an opportunity for people to participate in a project that created benefits for more people than those who told their stories.

At the Eurobodalla launch people spoke about approaching their family histories as living heritage; each story in the book having the potential to contribute something real to a living person and to connect people to each other in new ways. The books are a stimulus for the oral tradition that is important to members of the Eurobodalla Aboriginal community. The few pages out of each Elder’s life (as Trish Ellis described them) serve as an introduction and a link between people who are re-assembling the past as their heritage.
Working together enabled members of the community to feel more freedom to talk about the past, and to accept that there were differences of opinion about events. Participants in the Eurobodalla project used the book launch to offer a way of reconciling differing views of the past, by talking about the social value of inclusiveness and by acknowledging that any event is recalled from multiple perspectives. In the background to this last idea is the sense that the past does not require consistency in people’s memories for it to have existed. This idea validated all members of the community as potential explorers of the past and as people with knowledge worthy of sharing.

So even though the processes of recording, publishing and launching the Eurobodalla book were complex and not without a few moments of community tension (that Trish Ellis and Iris White acknowledged in their speeches), overall the experience was a positive one for the community. For example, we heard from Margaret Cruse who, while she had not recorded her story, spoke about the enjoyment that the book had given her. Vivienne Mason, who had recorded her story, spoke to us about the popularity of the book with her family and how it was inspiring her young nieces and nephews to begin to research their family tree.

The Eurobodalla book launch showed us the extensive capacity of this Aboriginal community to conceive of and to manage its family histories as living heritage.

The courage shown by the Eurobodalla Elders to tell their stories, histories as living heritage.

The whole thing about wellbeing is untapped happiness

The concept of wellbeing has emerged during this evaluation as a way for Aboriginal people to talk about the quality of life that comes from being able to tie together Aboriginal identity, post-contact history and pre-contact heritage. Understanding wellbeing in this all encompassing way helps to articulate the impacts of these factors on the everyday lives of the Aboriginal people who spoke to us. It is a way of describing the interdependence of who you are and how you live as an Aboriginal person. It also addresses the aspirations that these people have for their place in today’s Australian society.

Chapter ten, which looks at the thoughts of Aboriginal staff, about what wellbeing means to them, serves to highlight their commitment to Aboriginal people in NSW to achieve public respect for this emerging belief in a ‘living heritage’.

By considering the approaches of Aboriginal staff within the department, we have provided examples of the practical side of wellbeing that Aboriginal staff recognise as being generated by Aboriginal cultural ways of working with heritage in communities and as public servants.

A common thread that emerged from the Aboriginal staff members’ descriptions of wellbeing is that in terms of Aboriginal heritage, wellbeing is a positive experience of one’s self as an Aboriginal person. The ways in which this group of staff have talked about Aboriginal identity show it to be the cultural property of individuals, which has the potential to include them in the collective cultural worlds of Aboriginal societies, and which also situates them in relation to other societies in Australia. It is also an identity that offers a spiritual home for one’s heritage, history and biography on Country and in the bush.

Aboriginality was described to us as an identity that has a resilient side to it. Gavin Andrews spoke about identity being something that cannot easily be taken from someone. Conversely, the speakers in this chapter also discussed the factors that can reduce people’s capacity to gain wellbeing from their identity as an Aboriginal person.

The absence of a respected basis for participation by Aboriginal people in the broader Australian society lies at the core of the negatives described by the staff. Gavin Andrews described how self respect can be worn away by constant encounters with negative portrayals of Aboriginality (one’s own and that of others). Pamela Young referred to the disillusionment expressed by Aboriginal people she had spoken to about what they are supposed to be. In sum, these limitations of the expression of identity are examples of external social factors that can reduce the capacity of Aboriginal people to participate in Australian society and to feel good about who they are.

A major theme in all of the conversations that we have had with Aboriginal people during our evaluation is that these are people who have actively sought their place in the world and who wish to assert the history of their place. It is a place that is part of society as a whole, and one which makes a valid contribution. Pamela Young articulates this position in Chapter ten when she says:

Wellbeing is about the future. It’s how you can talk about the past and accept how it fits into today’s world. The Elders recording their stories... they accept the past and so future generations can accept it too.

It is an approach to history that claims an experiential link between history and heritage. Such an approach explains why Mark Simon is able to speak about gaining access to the culture that goes with his identity:

My vision, so to speak, is changed. I wanted to try to get a hold of more of my culture than when I was growing up. I took this job to learn. I didn’t grow up in my culture. I was proud of my identity. But at school I was the only one in my year...

Mark later said how much satisfaction he gains from recording and registering Aboriginal sites. Being able to act on the potential of his identity, in this case to support his community’s reclamation of their heritage, gives Mark a sense of completeness as a member of society in general. He is in his element or to put it another way, he is ‘at home’. By contributing to the role of his community as managers of their Aboriginal heritage, he contributes to society as a whole.
The idea of ‘living Aboriginal heritage’ is about claiming a real place in the present, in the world in which we all live. The corresponding Aboriginal identity to this ‘living heritage’ allows the people who practice this identity to embody a continuity between post-contact history and pre-contact heritage, and to embody this continuity between past and present. This establishes a position from which it is possible to generate new ideas about the possible relationships between history, heritage and culture. Pamela Young talks about this idea:

> When you say wellbeing that’s a relationship to a human being; a person; a living identity. And that takes it to another level, the level of heritage and the oldest living culture in the world. We, Aboriginal people, are human beings with all these connections to heritage and culture.

It is an identity that includes expectations about having the freedom to explore any aspect of Australia’s economy and society. This idea was articulated by Cheryl Brown when she talked about helping her children become ‘more capable for making friends and being around different people’, to help prepare them for life and work, as well as being part of a family and a community.

Between Mark Simon’s and Cheryl Brown’s descriptions of where in this society their identity takes them as Aboriginal people we can see an inward and an outward movement from Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal communities offer their members particular social and cultural opportunities. However, these communities should not be thought of as static, they are dynamic. The groundswell of communities nominating to participate in the Heritage Series is evidence of this.

People who have lived their lives in these communities also enjoy the opportunity to make worthwhile contributions to society. Christine Corby, CEO of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service makes this point in her feedback in Chapter nine:

> There was so much more I would have liked to mention so my children could have an understanding of why I chose to live in Walgett when many of my cousins moved on to further their careers and/or settle in other towns to start their families.

It is not a given that choosing to identify as Aboriginal confers an automatic sense of wellbeing. Pamela Young observed:

> If you are comfortable with what you are doing, the respect is there for yourself. But it’s a long journey to get to wellbeing. I think a lot of Aboriginal people are so disillusioned with what they are supposed to be. Wellbeing takes you on your journey to find yourself. When you have your wellbeing everything changes and you can have relationships with others. And whatever that may be: physical and spiritual, because in that way it has more of an expanding social connection.

Aboriginal people who participate in ‘living heritage’ emerge from our evaluation as a great source of potential for happiness and wellbeing for each other. Christian Hampson spoke about the emotional side for him and his colleagues of working with Aboriginal heritage. It is evident in the feedback from many of the story-tellers in the Heritage Series that talking about the past, and claiming as Aboriginal heritage the post settlement history of last 200 years is a new experience. It has become clear to us from conducting this evaluation of the Heritage Series, that the older members of Aboriginal communities are making a significant contribution to this re-positioning of the past.
Trust me, I’m from the government!

We have seen from the discussion of wellbeing by Aboriginal staff in Chapter ten that Aboriginal people working in cultural heritage within the context of government can experience a tension between their community affiliations and their roles as public servants. Their jobs with DECCW require Aboriginality and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, as well as the general skills and qualifications of a public servant, and at times these areas of expertise may not fit comfortably together.

One of the prerequisites of any Aboriginal identified position in DECCW is to have the support of Aboriginal communities. At times they may be asked to act beyond this frame of reference. In such situations each Aboriginal staff member is reliant on exercising considerable judgement to reconcile his or her cultural beliefs and values with those which exist for them as public servants. Each time that they do this, they face an element of risk, they step into a situation in which their contribution is not clear cut. The fine grained understandings of wellbeing that the Aboriginal staff members shared with us in Chapter ten are evidence of the depth of engagement that they have with their roles as public servants and as members of Aboriginal communities.

The practical responses by Aboriginal staff to this tension frequently contribute to highly innovative and successful projects like the Sites of Significance Survey and the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series. In Chapter two we examined the work of two Aboriginal researchers, Ray Kelly and Kath Schilling. As a founding member of the Sites of Significance Survey, Ray Kelly established the idea within DECCW of living Aboriginal heritage and demonstrated that oral traditions continued to exist for places and sites that were important to Aboriginal communities. Ray Kelly developed an approach to managing Aboriginal cultural heritage that achieved results for Aboriginal communities and for DECCW.

He was able to do this by demonstrating that there are relationships between Aboriginal people and places that are intrinsic to any practices concerned with managing Aboriginal cultural heritage. His evidence for this was that NSW did contain particular Aboriginal people in possession of beliefs and expertise that are specific to Country. He was an innovator because he recognised that community development was an essential part of Aboriginal cultural heritage management. While Ray Kelly did not use the term ‘community development’ himself, the terms encapsulates many of the ideas he did express. A useful short definition is ‘a process of strengthening individuals, groups and organisations to gain the knowledge and power to work towards change in their communities’. I have introduced the term here because it’s widely understood in government policy thinking and will help to set the findings of this evaluation into the context of the NSW Government’s approach to wellbeing.

Ray Kelly saw community development as the hub for the transfer of knowledge between Aboriginal people and that it would lead to the resurgence of Aboriginal knowledge as a foundation for modern Aboriginal cultures. He made increasing the opportunities for Aboriginal people to continue these oral traditions, and the social agendas of the Aboriginal communities to inform government policy concerned with cultural heritage management, a part of his professional role.

Thirty years later, Kath Schilling as coordinator of the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series recognised the need to ‘build bridges’ between Aboriginal communities and DECCW. Kath, like Ray Kelly, saw that her role included active and sustained participation in relationships between communities and DECCW. Kath approached Aboriginal heritage as a living heritage which is sustained by and which sustains current societies of Aboriginal people.

Kath, in her coordination of and editorial contribution to the Heritage Series has sought to increase the opportunities for Aboriginal people to communicate with each other about their heritage. A goal which, according to the feedback we received during our evaluation, is confirmed by the communities in which these books are situated.

The considerable level of voluntary participation that we had from communities during our evaluation of the Heritage Series is evidence of the continuing knowledge about their collaboration with DECCW to produce the books. An appreciation by the broader community of the Aboriginal communities and their heritage in these particular locations has also been another of the successful outcomes from these books.

Kath Schilling’s and Ray Kelly’s ideas about what they call modern Aboriginal culture demonstrate a long standing commitment to the social agendas of the Aboriginal communities that they collaborated with. We discussed how their involvement with communities gives an ethical basis to their research. Both researchers positioned themselves as educators of DECCW that employed them as resource people for the communities that they worked with. Their engagement with feelings (their own as well as those of the people they worked with) played an important part in the success of their research.

Understanding what successful research is for Kath Schilling and was for Ray Kelly, illustrates in more detail their engagement with Aboriginal community social agendas. Truth making processes figure strongly in the work of both researchers, seeking to challenge inaccurate and damaging information about Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Another important aim for them both has been the creation of increased opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in their own and in each others’ social and cultural worlds and for this participation to be respected by the wider society. Notably, both their approaches have included the intention to lay the foundations for long term productive relationships between Aboriginal communities and DECCW.

No more silence we do have a voice

Pamela Young talked, in Chapter three, about the excitement she felt about working in a research context which has been shaped by Aboriginal researchers like Kath Schilling. Pamela vividly recalls her early experience of Kath’s approach to oral history collaborations at a workshop with Aboriginal women in Kyogle. Pamela’s account of the interplay at Kyogle between emotion and the activity of broaching the past touches on our earlier point about the tension experienced by Aboriginal staff between their roles as public servants and members of Aboriginal communities. In this case, we see a further dimension, because it is a description of what is at stake for a community to enter into a partnership with DECCW to record and publish their heritage.

During our evaluation, it was Pamela who sought out and revitalised the relationships that had been forged between the community and DECCW during the production of each Heritage book. This process took her into an important discovery of her own heritage, when she found a picture of her grandmother in the Brungle & Tumut book and subsequently met relatives she had not previously known.
Pamela’s description of the cross-over between her role as researcher and her heritage as an Aboriginal woman is further illustration of the complex situations in which Aboriginal people work in cultural heritage, as well as confirming Ray Kelly’s contention that Aboriginal participation in heritage research acts as a stimulus for community development. Pamela’s story was one example among many of the connections and relationships that these books effect in the lives of people who read them.

It is very apparent in the feedback from the story-tellers in Nambucca, Nowra, Brungle & Tumut, Port Stephens, Bourke, and Walgett & Collarenebri that Elders are emerging for their communities as guides to the past and to potential relationships between people. While this knowledge and role exists independently to the Heritage books, the Elders’ feedback shows that the books have confirmed their authority in this area in the eyes of their immediate communities and the broader community.

The Elders talk about gaining more opportunities to speak to the young people in their communities and to convey the specific things that they want the children and youth to know; the social values of caring and sharing, the Aboriginal history of the region, and to understand the spiritual and cultural side of their Aboriginal identities. Elders have also been invited to participate in research projects as well as to speak to non-Indigenous groups within their communities, thereby increasing the range and scope of relationships available to the Elders and to the broader community.

Being able to increase their participation in their communities has also contributed to the wellbeing of the Elders. Feedback from each of the books incorporated descriptions of the feelings that they’d experienced after recording and publishing their stories these included: good, happy, and proud.

Although the experience of doing the book was generally a positive one for the story-tellers, a recurring theme emerged about ‘feeling rushed’ or realising later that there was more that they could add to their story. Elders highlighted the tension that occurs between recording and publishing an individual life story and participating in a large scale community based heritage project. At the same time, the story-tellers that we spoke to acknowledge that the benefit to the community of doing a collective heritage book was in recording people’s oral histories before certain Elders passed away.

There is a sense in the feedback from the Elders that they are showing the world their history for the first time. Stepping forward to tell their stories after so much silence must have taken a great deal of courage. Maude Moore talks about the disrespect for Aboriginal culture and symbols that persists in some sections of the broader Nowra community. In particular, she describes how the local Mayor burnt an Aboriginal flag that she’d sat up sewing all night. Elders like Maude Moore, through their stories, appear to be helping their community to assert the significance of their shared history. This support has also extended to distributing their copies of the Heritage book to schools, land councils, prisons and to family and to friends.

Another theme in the feedback from the Elders is about having a voice that is recognisably theirs. Some Elders described the book as the beginning of that process. It was important to many of the Elders that the books are mainly produced by Aboriginal people about Aboriginal people. This is less to do with any negative attitude towards non-Indigenous people and more to do with a desire to be active within Aboriginal societies.

In their research roles, both Ray Kelly and Kath Schilling recognised how important it was to Aboriginal communities to increase their visibility to each other and their communication with each other.

Phyllis Freeman spoke about this issue in Chapter six:

*People go to Italians to find out about Italians. People go to Greeks to find out about Greeks. People go to white fellows to talk about Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people need to find out about each other.*

Some of the groups of Elders who we spoke to described themselves as a generation who have two objectives in recording their oral histories. The first is to make the past known to the younger generations, because these Elders grew up in times when the past was not readily accessible. The second is to reclaim this history as the heritage of Aboriginal people, and for Aboriginal people to be seen by the wider society as the experts in their own heritage.

The book has helped to forge connections between Elders within and across regions. Many of the Elders who we spoke to had read other books in the Heritage Series and spoke about connections with their own heritage that they had come across. However, a direct personal affiliation was not the only outcome from their enjoyment of the other books, Elders also talked about feeling proud of other community’s books, and a kind of affinity with each other as people who have undergone a similar experience.

During our discussions with each community, either explicitly or implicitly the question came up about what status could each collection of stories have as Aboriginal heritage in the community where it was situated. For example, Carol Ridgeway Bissett in Port Stephens said, ‘Although the book was called Port Stephens it was not clear if it was about Country or about women who just happen to live here’. Kath Schilling’s desire that the Heritage Series be about real places and real people meant that each community had to encounter and consider the history that has caused dislocations and relocations between Aboriginal people and place.

Kath gave a lot of time and consideration to the process of arriving at agreement to proceed with oral history recordings with communities. These community discussions and their outcomes are another example of the community development which resulted from Ray Kelly’s and Kath Schilling’s approaches to Aboriginal heritage research. The books have created concrete experiences for communities that history can be claimed and expressed as heritage and that this does not disrupt processes associated with determining Native Title for example.

Publishing their stories in the book has been one way in which the participants can fulfil the responsibilities that they feel they have as Elders to their community. One of these is to overcome the caution about speaking publicly about themselves that has existed for their generation and their parents. The Elders spoke about their desire to share their stories with their families and the younger generations. Many of the Elders talked about being ‘seen and not heard’ as children and how this had made it difficult for them to find out about the past.

They were conscious of the value of the knowledge gained by their generation growing up as Aboriginal people during a different era to the one faced today by young Aboriginal people. The Elders wish to add to the resilience of this younger generation by giving them the benefit of their own experience of the types of hardships faced by Aboriginal people in our society. This recognition by Elders that their experiences, history and knowledge of life in post-contact Australia is of value to their youth is further evidence of the community development which is supported by the Heritage Series.
Understanding the Heritage Series within a community development framework

Community development is a term that refers to what communities can do for themselves and what they aspire to do in the future. It is about achieving and sustaining a good quality of life or wellbeing within the community.

Communities that are able to contribute to their own quality of life often exhibit certain features. For example, people know the people around them, residents feel as though they can ask each other for help now and again, and residents feel confident that if the community’s quality of life is threatened or stressed in some way, that they can act together with others from the community to address the problem. On an emotional side, people feel ‘at home’ in their community. It is where they can experience a range of connections, from something as simple as being in a familiar world, to intricate personal and family histories of people and place.

Participation, productive relationships, open communication and a capacity to share or to generate collective assets are some of the factors that sustain community development.

This table shows how the Heritage Series helped to enhance these capacities in the communities that participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Many of the Elders describe the experience of recording and publishing their stories as having their identity as an Aboriginal person appreciated and respected by the broader community in which they live.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Productive relationships</td>
<td>Being appreciated for who they are has encouraged these Elders to approach the broader community with more confidence. For example Dean Freeman’s comment, ‘Aunty Soni, three years ago wouldn’t have spoken in public, now look at her.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open communication</td>
<td>By taking the lead within their communities and producing Heritage books, the Elders have influenced community perceptions about access to the past, and paved the way for younger generations to ask questions as well as do their own research, for example, family trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate or share collective assets</td>
<td>The historical period which this generation of Elders experienced and contributed to and which they can vividly recall is becoming claimed as the heritage of current generations of Aboriginal people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the number of Elders who recorded their oral histories in the Heritage Series is relatively small compared to the Aboriginal populations of the locations of the books, the Elders actively included their families, friends and local organisations, thereby increasing participation across the community.

Publishing the books on DECCW’s web site as pdf documents has increased community participation; local schools for example, use the books as reference materials, and people who are researching their family histories have been able to identify and contact relatives.

The Elders feel an affinity with other communities who have also published books in the Heritage Series.

Each book was produced collaboratively; members of the community joined together, and also worked in partnership with DECCW and other organisations. (This pattern varied with the Eurobodalla book, because it was a joint Aboriginal community and local government initiative).

Elders have increased the range of their relationships within their communities as a consequence of being invited to speak in schools, to local interest groups and to participate in university research projects.

Elders have also become recognised as guides to the past and to historical relationships between people.

Elders have given the books to non-Indigenous branches of their families.

Elders described the books as linking them to Elders across NSW.

Some Elders have attended other launches of books in the series.

Our evaluation has included a number of references to conflict at the start of or during the process of recording and publishing the Heritage books. We saw in the documentation of the Eurobodalla book launch, and later, in Kath’s recollections about each book, that the issues at the core of these conflicts were significant and had their foundation in negative experiences that remained active in collective and individual memories.

Elders have gained public respect as people who are authorised to speak about the past. This had given encouragement to others to look at and speak about the past.

Family members reconnecting with each other have used the books as an introduction.

The Elders who have given non-Indigenous branches of their families’ copies of the Heritage books have done so to educate them about the Aboriginal heritage that they have married into.

Elders have expressed a desire to meet and talk to other story-tellers from the Heritage Series, because of the experiences that they have discovered that they have in common.

The increased opportunities for Elders to participate in their communities and in the broader community reflects a sense of these Elders as being valued by the whole community; as living heritage.

Photographs and other material, such as published memories of the past are rare items of heritage among Aboriginal people; the books enable them to be shared between family members and by the community.

The increased opportunities for Elders to participate in their communities and in the broader community reflects a sense of these Elders as being valued by the whole community; as living heritage.

Photographs and other material, such as published memories of the past are rare items of heritage among Aboriginal people; the books enable them to be shared between family members and by the community.

The communities that these Elders belong to gain leadership which is enhanced by the relationships and affinity that Elders have with each other as a consequence of producing a Heritage book.
Future directions

The feedback from participants in the Heritage Series makes it clear that these books have a future. Some of the story-tellers and their families will continue to treasure the books as a tangible acknowledgement of the importance of their stories to the community and a wider audience. Others have begun to share their stories with each other, their families, communities and local schools, as a result of participating in the Heritage Series and will continue to build connections and share stories into the future. This evaluation has found that the Heritage Series has enhanced individual and community wellbeing, and facilitated the ongoing renewal of ‘living heritage’; there are many ways in which the books will have ongoing legacies as collective assets that have helped bring people together.

The process of sharing brief stories left some participants feeling that they would like to share and document more of their knowledge and experience, and indeed some of them took the opportunity to add to their stories via this book. The men in some communities felt that they had missed out, and would like to develop their own projects, and some of those who chose not to participate in the books later felt that they too might like to tell their stories. These story-tellers may find satisfying ways in which to share their stories (or may already have done so) within their families and communities, but there are perhaps further opportunities for fruitful collaboration between participating communities and the government.

Several of the story-tellers in the Heritage Series included suggestions for future directions for the Heritage Series. Viola Brown, from the Port Stephens Heritage book suggests a future for the Heritage Series which involves publishing books on traditional knowledge about practical things, information that would be useful to a person of any background living in Australia, and combining the books with culture camps, where people learn how to apply the knowledge. Viola’s idea focuses on making Aboriginal knowledge about the environment, natural resources and survival central to the greater Australian society. Thus Aboriginal knowledge would take its place alongside general common sense knowledge. This would mean that the greater Australian society would learn Aboriginal practical knowledge and in the course of acquiring these skills become educated in Aboriginal beliefs and protocols.

The late Rose Fernando, had for a long time envisaged a book on powerful Aboriginal women. Rose, who had been inspired by the gains made by Maori societies in New Zealand, thought that younger generations could learn from reading about the ways in which women have gained strength through their culture and how their strength has benefited their communities.

Members of the Dharriwaa Elders group, Walgett, also provided some suggestions; linking together in some sort of data base all of the oral histories that have been published in the Heritage Series; and an oral history of Aboriginal people’s ideas for the future.

The Heritage books have proved to be a popular, accessible way of presenting individuals’ stories and the living heritage of Aboriginal communities more broadly. The extension of the Heritage Series or development of similar projects has the potential to enhance wellbeing in Aboriginal communities, both those that have already participated and those that have not.

The process of making the Heritage books in each of the communities was as important as the product. The books themselves are only the physical manifestations of thoughtful collaboration, the development of trust between the community and government, the courage of the story-tellers, and sincerity and sensitivity of the facilitators. The process has been challenging as well as productive. Here, we have been able to bring the insights and experiences of participants and researchers together to explore the complex and important links between heritage and wellbeing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An identity that embodies ‘living heritage’</th>
<th>Health of the elderly</th>
<th>Informal learning</th>
<th>Elders provide community leadership</th>
<th>The community provides opportunities for strengthening culture</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Elders are leaders in their community in the acceptance of post contact history as heritage. This public status supports emerging ideas about how identifying as Aboriginal creates the opportunity to claim post-contact history as heritage as well as to embody pre-contact heritage. It is an identity that incorporates increased potential for wellbeing, because it locates people in a social position that is of value to society as a whole.</td>
<td>The Elders feel an affinity with other communities who have also published books in the Heritage Series. Elders described the books as linking them to Elders across NSW and some Elders have attended other launches of books in the series. Elder report positive feelings from participating in the Heritage Series.</td>
<td>The Elders frequently describe their motivation to tell their stories as a way of educating the young and as one way of teaching them about their culture. The books are also used as an educational resource; local schools for example, use the books as reference materials and invite the Elders to schools as guest speakers. The process of working together as a community to produce the books develops skill sharing: younger community members have assisted their Elders with recording and transcribing their stories. Further evidence is the desire for younger generations to research their family histories that is reported by Elders as a consequence of recording their stories. Evidence of learning life skills is the Elders motivation to share their stories with younger generations to increase their resilience, by knowing how their Elders survived and thrived in difficult times.</td>
<td>Although the number of Elders who recorded their oral histories in the Heritage Series is relatively small compared to the Aboriginal populations of the locations of the books, the Elders actively included their families, friends and local organisations, thereby increasing participation across the community. Our evaluation has included a number of references to conflict at the start of or during the process of recording and publishing the Heritage books. We saw in the documentation of the Eurobodalla book launch, and later, in Kath’s recollections about each book, that the issues at the core of these conflicts were significant and had their foundation in negative experiences that remained active in collective and individual memories. We also saw that through their participation in the Heritage books, that the Elders created opportunities for themselves and for others to be respected for telling their stories. Thereby, demonstrating that sometimes fixed positions that arise in communities about what can and can’t be done are overcome by collaboration and by adhering to social values such as inclusiveness and respect.</td>
<td>We have already drawn attention to the concern of Elders for the welfare of younger generations, as well as to the inter and intra community relationships generated by participation in the Heritage Series. The previous characteristics of community development arising from the Heritage Series has also provided evidence of strengthening culture (the belief in ‘living heritage’): cultural expression and cultural learning (the oral traditions of communities are expanded by the Heritage books because, as we demonstrated it is an expectation of people producing these books that they will help to forge new relationships between people and between people and their heritage); the books make an extensive contribution to informal learning and mentoring of youth by Elders. Because these are family histories, they reaffirm the value of these relationships and shared heritage.</td>
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Appendix 1  
Sequence of publications in the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series

Following, sequenced in publication date order, are the 12 books in the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series. There are a couple of anomalies that are dealt with in this appendix so that accurate records are available for future reference.

The first is a small matter of different ways of referring to the number of books in the series and the specific attribution of numbers to books. When Kath Schilling and others speak about the series, it is described as consisting of 12 books, however, the sequence consists of 11 entries because although there are two books in the series for Walgett and Collarenebri, in the introduction to the Wagga Wagga book, the Walgett and Collarenebri Women’s and Men’s books are referred to as a single entry (2006: iii).

The second concerns variations in the publication dates of the books. Nearly all of them have been republished since their first edition and in the later print run the date of publication reflects the later printing as opposed to the original. In the list below each book is given its original publication date.

1. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nambucca, 2003**  
   Compiled: Kath Schilling  
   Collaborator: Virginia Jarret  
   Edited: Sabine Partl and Denis Byrne  
   Project support: Christine Kelly, Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council; Maxine Walker (NPWS Coffs Harbour); Bruce and Helen McInnes, Nambucca Golf Club Stuart Island  
   Published: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

2. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Nowra, 2004**  
   Compiled: Kath Schilling  
   Collaborator: Lynette Simms  
   Edited: Sabine Partl and Denis Byrne  
   Community support: Sonny Simms, Chair Nowra LALC. Nowra Aboriginal Cultural Centre, the Berry Museum and the Nowra Aboriginal Cultural Centre  
   Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

3. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Brungle & Tumut, 2004**  
   Compiled: Fiona Hamilton. Aboriginal Heritage Planning Officer; Kath Schilling, Women’s Heritage Coordinator  
   Edited: Sabine Partl  
   Project support: Dean Freeman, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, Tumut; Rob McMillan, Tumut Council; Jan and Colin Locke, Tumut Festival Committee  
   Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

4. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Wollongong, 2004**  
   Compiled: Sue Wesson and Kath Shilling  
   Edited: Sabine Partl  
   Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

5. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Port Stephens, 2004**  
   Compiled: Kath Schilling  
   Edited: Sharon Veale and Sabine Partl  
   Project support: Warren Mayer, Aboriginal Heritage and Conservation Officer, Nelson Bay  
   Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

6. **Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Bourke, 2005**  
   Compiled: Kath Schilling  
   Edited: Sabine Partl  
   Project support: Phil Sullivan, Aboriginal Heritage and Conservation Officer, Bourke; Rebecca Ogden – Brunnell (Project Initiator); Grace Wilson – facilitated introductions; Melissa Hull & Nerida Green, Bourke National Parks Office  
   Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)
Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: 
Wagga Wagga, 2006
Compiled: Dean Freeman, Liz Dargin and Kath Schilling
Edited: Sabine Partl
Project support: Noeline Milliken, Sandra Grentell and Therese Reid
Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: 
Nepean, 2007
Compiled: Mark Simon, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, Central Aboriginal Heritage Region
Edited: Sabine Partl
Collaborators: Vanessa Kendall and Sharon Riley
Published: Department of Environment and Conservation (now Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW)

Aboriginal Men & Women’s Heritage: 
Eurobodalla, 2008
Researched and compiled: Susan Dale Donaldson (Environment & Cultural Services) and Kath Schilling
Project Directed by: Eurobodalla Aboriginal Heritage Steering Committee, Eurobodalla Shire Council, Department of Environment and Climate Change, Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Elders Groups and community members
Edited: Anita Brunhuber, Deb Lenson (Eurobodalla Shire Council) and Kath Schilling (DECCW)
Published: Eurobodalla Shire Council, Moruya, NSW
Kath Schilling

I have Wiradjuri heritage from the Darlington Point area of NSW going back to the Warangesda Aboriginal Mission / Station, Darlington Point NSW.

My mother's name was Mary Jane Kelly. Although her birth name was Janet May Kelly, people called her May. She married William Meagher who came from the Shepparton area of Victoria. Together they had 11 children between 1929 and 1950. I'm the youngest and am the 11th child of the 11th child. (My dad’s parents had 13 kids and he was the 11th).

My granny’s name was Jane Free, she married John Thomas Kelly. They lived in Darlington Point all their lives. They met over at Tubbo Station when they were both working there. After Warangesda closed in 1926 they moved down to what they called the Police Paddock at the Point and later moved their pieces of the place they were living up to Darling Street and lived there for the rest of their lives. Granny died in 1952 so I didn’t really know her.

Her parents were Minnie Mellon and Billy (William Free); they were married by the Reverend John Gribble on Warangesda in 1882 in a group ceremony. Minnie is buried on Warangesda along with Granny’s sister, Hannah. Billy Free went on to marry a lass from Griffith, Katie Johnson. Katie past away six months after they married and he disappeared from Warangesda. I eventually found evidence that he had gone to Brewarrina Aboriginal Station where he again married at the age of 53, this time to Annie Governor. Annie was 51 at the time. Billy died at the age of 57 and is buried on Brewarrina. Billy was buried in the early cemetery. Billy Foote gave detailed information for the death certificate. He said Billy Free had been born in 1840 at Hay and his father’s name was Michael. No mother was mentioned.

Minnie’s father was Jackie Mellon. There is no mention of his mother’s name. Gribble described Jackie as Old Jackie Mellon and it seems he was often together with Old Tommy Bundore. They didn’t seem to live on Warangesda but came and went. Old Jackie died in 1888.

These days I am working as the manager of the Central Regional, in the Aboriginal Heritage Operations Branch for DECCW. In my last role I was Aboriginal Women’s Heritage Coordinator, when I worked with communities on the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series. Previous to this position I managed the Aboriginal Family History Unit at AIATSIS and previous to that, I worked as a Development Officer for HACC Services in Mt Druitt.

About 30+ years in Aboriginal Affairs of one sort or another. I had the opportunity to give a submission to the Inquiry into the Stolen Generations and continued to help thousands of people find their heritage over the years at AIATSIS. At one stage I gave a submission to the United Nations assembly when AIATSIS sponsored me to do Human Rights Training in Bangkok. A definite highlight in my career. The biggest oral history project I undertook was to interview Aboriginal people from across Australia to find out how things changed for them after the 1967 Referendum. Dale Edwards and I were both involved in that project. Then the launch of the publication at the Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in 1997. It’s been an interesting path. I have enjoyed doing the Aboriginal Women’s and Men’s Heritage Series of publications.

Pamela Young

My name is Pamela Young. I am an Aboriginal Kamilaroi Ngunnawal woman. My mother’s Country is Kamilaroi; my father’s Country is Ngunnawal. I am a member of the stolen generation and the second generation to be removed in my one family. I grew up with foster parents from the age of two years old. At the age of two, I was taken from my family and home and given to foster parents.

At the age of twelve the Government Welfare Board released me from my foster parents and I was then put in the custody of a government girl’s home. I stayed there until I was fifteen years old. I then was transferred to a children’s home. My role as a carer was to look after a blind girl as well as to look after children from the ages of twelve months to twelve years. I was there for a year. The government found me another place to stay and another job. In this job I was an accountant in an office in Glebe, Sydney.

My own story ‘Becoming Black’ will explore my journeys that I have undertaken and I will write that story after this Wellbeing project is completed. But for now, I am a mother and a grandmother.

My other roles over the years have been that of an Actor, a Storyteller, an Interpretation Officer, Discovery Ranger, a coordinator for Performing Arts productions at the Belvoir St Theatre, as an Assistant Director for the Bangarra Dance Theatre, and an Events coordinator along with many stints in film and TV both nationally and internationally. I have even worked at the NSW Art Gallery and at the Australian Museum in Sydney. I still wear many hats today.
I came to Australia in 1977. I was what they call a ‘ten pound pommy’. My family had been living in England before we emigrated. I spent my childhood years in Saudi Arabia. My brother returned to Saudi as an adult and continues to live in the town where we grew up. I am one of six children. One sister lives in London, a brother in Denmark and the rest of my family live in Adelaide, South Australia.

In 1984 I got a job in the Northern Territory and that is when I first began to collaborate with Aboriginal people on cultural projects. I worked at Batchelor College as the manager of the art unit. By 1988 I was living and working in South Australia, near Lake Eyre. I worked for the Marree Arabunna People’s Committee as a policy adviser and coordinator of their community development initiatives. During this time I also worked with members of one or two Dieri families. Originally, I trained to be a sculptor and printmaker and then later, I completed post graduate studies in anthropology and history. I divide my time between making art and doing research projects.

I started working for the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales in 2001. Kath Schilling and I sat opposite each other. We began our new jobs a few months apart from each other. Kath would tell me all about her travels to Nambucca and Nowra while she was getting the Heritage Series off the ground.

After a few years the organisation we worked for had become a part of DECCW. I met Pamela Young through Kath, she introduced us one time at a workshop. About a year later, I asked Kath for suggestions about whom I could team up with to do my research and she mentioned Pamela. Kath told me that Pamela had been pipped at the post for a project manager role and was really interested to get involved in Aboriginal heritage projects. At that stage Pamela’s main role was as a Discovery Ranger. I have really enjoyed working with Kath and Pamela on this Wellbeing project.

From Left: Berenice Carrington, Pamela Young and Kath Schilling. Photo courtesy of Karen Bland. Copyright rests with the photographer.


Aboriginal community (2005) *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Bourke*, Department of Environment and Climate Change, Sydney, NSW.


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