



# TALKING HISTORY

Oral History Guidelines

Sharon Veale and Kathleen Schilling

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Department of Environment & Conservation (NSW)

PO Box 1967 Hurstville NSW 2220

Phone: 02 9585 6444

Fax: 02 9585 6555

Website: [www.environment.nsw.gov.au](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au)

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We would like to acknowledge the staff that attended that Workshop for their enthusiasm and interest in oral history. That event was the initial catalyst for these guidelines and several of those people continued to demonstrate their commitment to oral history by providing insightful comments on previous versions of this text. We thank them for their efforts.

An online version of *Talking History* is available via our website, [www.npws.gov.au](http://www.npws.gov.au) where you will also find other publications and information related to cultural heritage within DEC [www.environment.nsw.gov.au](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au)

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# 1 Introduction

*Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people ... It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time ... Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history.<sup>1</sup>*

Today oral history is an accepted part of much heritage work. Oral history certainly plays an important part in many Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) projects involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Oral history recording is an essential part of the DEC cultural heritage work. The communities of NSW in all their diversity are a vital source of living history. Their knowledge, experience and memories, combined with the attachments and meanings that they bestow upon particular places and landscapes across NSW, contribute to our understanding of cultural heritage significance and proper conservation.

The general acceptance that oral history is critical to our understanding and appreciation of landscapes and places is linked to broader trends in history. Trends that have spawned an emphasis on experiential and personal accounts of the past, and which have offered the people and places that were once not the preserve of traditional historical narratives a legitimate place in our history.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past Oral History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, p18.

Reflecting the wider interest in oral history there is now abundant literature available about its theory and practice. This guideline highlights relevant DEC policy, select practical information, as well as information about resources related to oral history which provide clear direction on such things as designing interviews, interview techniques, recording equipment and project evaluation. It is intended to assist all staff regardless of experience. Even with limited experience in oral history, this guide should provide enough information for someone to design, undertake, or supervise an oral history project. For others, well practiced in oral history, this guide should serve as a reference to the essential basics and provide some inspiration for future oral history projects.

Just as cultural heritage practice has evolved and changed, so too has oral history. There have been legislative changes, technological innovations and deeper thinking around various ethical issues such as the obligations of the interviewer and the rights of the narrator, as well as debates around history and memory. As public sector employees we need to ensure that we undertake our oral history work in a professional and ethical manner. Such practice will enable us to continue to build relationships with communities and reveal the places and experiences that are important to them, which in turn helps us craft vivid and ‘truer’ histories and ultimately more meaningful experiences of place.

## 2 What is Oral History?

Just as there are a range of different definitions for cultural heritage, there are many definitions of oral history. Yet most embody the same concepts using slightly different language. Oral history relates both to the personal stories and memories that people tell other people about the past and the formal collection or account of such stories and memories by oral historians and researchers. Within families often such stories are passed on from generation to generation. More frequently our history lives as a personal narrative ∞ remembered and told inside our own head. Throughout the passage of our lives we only ever speak about the past through our memories, the mental impressions we retain and are able to recall. These memories and the

stories we tell about them help explain our identity and place in the world.

The Oral History Association of Australia provides a two-part definition regarding oral history; as a practice or method, for recording, processing and conserving oral accounts of the past. It highlights the importance of the background knowledge, or preparedness of the interviewer, and an interviewee that has direct experience and knowledge of the interview topic. As well, it covers the functional aspects and states oral history is ‘a tape recorded interview in question and answer format ... on subjects of historical interest ... which is made accessible to other researchers.’<sup>2</sup>

In practice then oral history usually results in the creation of a taped interview based on good research that records the experiences and living memories of individuals, many of whom are not ordinarily recognised as being part of history. Recording oral histories provides us with a first hand insight into how people experience the past and remember it in the present. It captures an individual’s patterns of speech and often the kinds of attitudes, values and descriptions that have not generally been recorded as part of our history. Essentially, the practice of oral history produces records, or evidence, that enables us, when combined with other forms of evidence, to craft vital and compelling histories that can reveal a ‘truer’ past through people’s experiences and memories.

## 2.1 Memory & History

Oral history relies on memory, which is a highly individualised and personal construction of our past. No two people will remember the same historical event or place in the same way. Two people may have inhabited the same house, or fished at the same spot, yet how they remember it will differ. In recent times historians and others have turned their attentions to the questions circulating around identity, narrative and historical memory – how people make sense

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<sup>2</sup> Beth M. Robertson, *Oral History Handbook*, Oral History Association of Australia (South Australian Branch) Inc. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1996.

of and remember their past, how they connect their experience to what happens around them, how their past is remembered in the present and how they explain their lives in relation to the world they occupy.

If you reflect upon your own life you will quickly realise how you remember your life changes as you change. Your memory of a particular experience, or place, as a ten year old will be understood and interpreted quite differently as a thirty, sixty, or ninety year old. How we interpret and narrate our past experiences depends not only on our self-perception at a particular point in time, but will be mediated by the relationship the narrator has to the listener (interviewer) and the contemporary cultural context.

Critics of oral history have often pointed to the variable nature of oral evidence as a reason for continuing to privilege archival or written sources. Clearly oral history does not present an unmediated view of the past. Memory is lively, shaped as much by experiences in the past as by circumstances in the present. If we talk to people who have first-hand experience of a landscape, place or event, one could argue that this is in fact a very reliable account of the past because it is history as experienced by someone who was actually there. Yet people both remember and forget, and it is the forgetting that bothers some historians and leads to their mistrust of memory as a reliable source of historical evidence.

Often the same historians view archival sources as the most reliable form of historical evidence. These records are the products of another period, uncoloured by contemporary attitudes and values. Yet even pre-existing evidence is prone to inaccuracies and bias. The relationship between memory and history then is often in tension. But as much recent work has shown, individual oral histories and collective remembering, particularly by Aboriginal people, has not only exposed significant gaps in our documentary record, but provided us with compelling historical narratives that have exposed the wilful silencing of aspects of our past. The courageous sharing, of what for many Aboriginal people are profoundly painful and

deeply embedded memories, has enabled a broad shift in historical consciousness in this country.<sup>3</sup>

Individual and collective memory has the potential to unsettle place. Official historical narratives have long sought to legitimise dispossession with a surfeit of white narratives across the landscape. Even the Department of Environment and Conservation ‘remembers’ the landscape it manages by imaging and aspiring to forms of ‘naturalness’. By recording some of the ways people perceive and remember landscape, places and experiences, we are able to gain some insight into the different meanings and values that the environment is inscribed with.

## 2.2 Recording Places

The Department of Environment and Conservation has been recording oral testimony from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people for many years. Over the years talking to people about places that are special to them has resulted in the DEC accumulating an important archive of information about how people interact with and remember landscape and significant places.

The Sites of Significance Survey in 1973, was a major cultural heritage project that included the collection of oral history. The survey team, comprised of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, spoke with, and in many instances, recorded interviews with Aboriginal people throughout NSW. Rather than confirming prevailing opinion that Aboriginal people in NSW had retained little cultural knowledge, the survey proved how robust and vital the transmission of cultural information was within communities. Cumulatively, the knowledge and memories that people privately retained and shared as part of the survey were a potent symbol of Aboriginal people’s continuing connection to country. The places they talked of demonstrated the depth and breadth of Aboriginal life

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<sup>3</sup> Oral history was used as evidence in the [Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991](#).

and the cultural ‘gift’ they collectively possessed.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, for many, involvement in the project provided an opportunity to renew their links to the past and was an important part of cultural revival. Since that time staff have continually spoken of the need to continue to record oral histories before community knowledge is lost with the passing of Elders.

Since the Sites of Significance Survey there have been many changes in cultural heritage management and in the practice of oral history. The DEC continues to collect oral histories today, and it seems with a renewed sense of interest and enthusiasm. Oral history it appears is an ideal way to explore and document the range of places that are remembered as important in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly oral history enables us to tell a different kind of history. It is a history characterised by ‘ordinary’ people’s lives, the kinds of lives that don’t often make it into history books or official records. It is at once more personal and experiential. Yet it is through more inclusive versions of the past that we are able to gain a greater appreciation and acceptance of others and ultimately ourselves. In the context of heritage work it is through oral histories that we gain insight into the places that people make, visit, occupy and remember. What such work often shows is how unique and vital people’s connections to places are. As the visibility and detail of smaller more subtle places comes into view we build up the patterns and textures of everyday life and in turn evolve a richer understanding of people’s lives and the landscapes they inhabit. It is through the lives of individuals and how they are intertwined with the lives of others that

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<sup>4</sup> The word ‘gift’ is used in the title of Howard Creamer’s report ‘A Gift and a Dreaming: The NSW Survey of Aboriginal Sacred and Significant Sites 1973-1983’, unpublished report, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dec. 1984. The word ‘Gift’ was used by Milli Boyd and several older Aboriginal people who were interviewed as part of the sites survey. It refers to cultural inheritance and encapsulates the places and meanings that are inherited and the information and values that are contributed to the milieu.

<sup>5</sup> The recent emphasis on stories and memories marks a shift, or perhaps a reaction against, the relics or sites based approach to cultural heritage that has tended to dominate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage management in recent years. For further discussion see Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw & Tracy Ireland, *social significance: a discussion paper*, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2001.

we can grow deeper personal and local histories. Such endeavours may ultimately enable us to reclaim the past and generate innovative and relevant histories of people and the places dear to them.

## 2.3 Is all recording Oral History?

Perhaps the discussion in these guidelines has promoted you to ask ‘whether or not all the recording we do can be called oral history?’ Essentially the answer to that question lies in what definition of oral history we accept. At DEC we record people’s memories, or note their stories, for a range of different purposes. We may want to find out about past landuse practices, or the location or history of specific sites, observed changes in flora and fauna, water quality, what plants and animals are valued and so on. Often it will be clear that what you are doing is ‘oral history’. Yet there are many circumstances where you may record a conversation with an individual’ or individuals’ about a particular place, or its importance that in the strictest sense will not be oral history. For example you may not have had an opportunity to research and prepare for the interview. Or perhaps the information you have recorded is of marginal value because the person has only vague or sketchy information, no direct or first-hand experience of it, or their account is incidental.

Much of the work we do is in the context of cultural heritage significance assessment, or researching which places are important to people. When assessment work is focussed on the values that are held by particular communities or groups of people it is called social significance assessment. Social significance is one of the four criteria used for assessing heritage values. Historic, scientific and aesthetic values are more commonly used and are mostly sufficient for demonstrating the heritage significance of a place. Rarely are all four criteria researched evenly, though ideally there will be some assessment of each.

Social significance is really the vitality of cultural significance assessment. It is defined in the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, as a strong or special association with a particular community or

cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that social value is not about history, but more about the present and people's contemporary attachment to place.<sup>7</sup> So social value relies on tradition, not history. In a sense oral history in the context of social significance assessment is a personal testimony that reveals the values, stories, memories and experiences of specific places. Oral history in the context of cultural heritage assessment work can assist in understanding social values within living memory. This means that we may gain an insight into the changes in people's values and the landscapes and places they consider important through their lives and experiences. Moreover, we may learn from recording the stories and memories that are passed from one generation to the next how different values become part of social memory and history and be able to track the shifts in values between the present and the past.

The accepted approach where values are assessed separately often means that the interrelationships and overlaps between values are not frequently examined. In most instances a place's historic or scientific values have provided sufficient evidence for it to be assessed as being of significance. Heritage professionals including architects, archaeologists and historians have and continue to prepare assessments that convincingly argue a place is significant for its historic, scientific or aesthetic values alone. In some instances where social significance is assessed as part of a heritage assessment there is often little evidence of broad discussion with communities, rather social values are determined on their behalf, or limited consultation is carried out. For DEC, it remains to be seen just how we come to terms with the reality of a community defined heritage that will inevitably be more unstable, disputed, dynamic and personal than previously acknowledged.

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<sup>6</sup> There are varying definitions of social value. See the ICOMOS Burra Charter and also the NSW Heritage Office, criterion D 'An item has strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group in NSW (or the local area) for social, cultural or spiritual reasons'. See also, Chris Johnson, *What is Social Value?*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2000, p129.

## 3 Where to Start?

This section covers some of the preliminaries you need to be aware of before you embark on an oral history project. It provides an overview and information about some important DEC guides and policies, as well as practical information about establishing and researching for oral history projects.

### 3.1 DEC Guides & Policies

In recent years several cultural heritage policies have been prepared for DEC staff. There are also staff guides such as the Staff Guide to Understanding The Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998, (PIIP Guide) that touch on matters which are relevant to the practice of oral history. Below is an excerpt from the PIIP Guide which outlines the principles we must all observe. Although the Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act was not drafted specifically with oral history in mind you must ensure that you understand our responsibilities in regard to personal information and privacy. We must also ensure that contractors undertaking projects, which involve the collection of personal information, observe the principles in the PIIP Act. Specific clauses, which outline how the contractor is to handle personal information, should be added to the standard contract for DEC. You should contact the DEC FOI/Privacy Contact Officer for more information. In addition you will need to ensure that your interviewees fill in a Privacy Notification Form, Section 10, Pre-Collection of Information. It is included in the DEC Cultural Heritage Information Policy.

The Privacy Notification Form covers some of the same ground that the DEC Information Agreement does and you may feel as though you are overwhelming or intimidating your interviewee with all the paperwork, however, the forms merely explain why we are collecting the information, how we will use and manage it, and any access conditions, especially if the information is to be held on either of the Division's public registers; the Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) or the Historic Heritage Information Management System (HHIMS). Essentially the forms are designed

to make us accountable and protect the rights of our informants. Copies of all forms should be given to your informants and copies should be held on relevant DEC work files.

All the DEC cultural heritage policies have some relationship to oral history. These policies should inform the way we understand, approach and carry out our work.

All personal information collected since 1 July 2000 must comply with the Collection Principles, this means:

- € You must only collect personal information if it is necessary to fulfil a function of DEC and to carry out your work.
- € You must collect personal information directly from the individual.
- € You must make the individual aware:
  - € that the information is being collected,
  - € of the purpose for which the information is being collected,
  - € of the intended recipients of the information,
  - € whether they must supply their personal information because of a legal requirement or whether it is voluntary, and any consequences for them if the information is not provided,
  - € that they have a right to access and correct their personal information once collected.

You must take reasonable steps to ensure that personal information collected is: relevant to the purpose, not excessive, accurate, up to date, and complete.

**All personal information at NPWS, irrespective of date of collection must comply with the principles of use, storage and disclosure. This means we must:**

- € keep the information for only as long as necessary for the purposes for which it was originally collected and used
- € only use the information for the purposes for which it was originally collected unless the individual has given their permission and the new purpose relates to the old purpose, or it is used to prevent or lessen a threat to the life and health of any individual
- € protect the information against misuse and unauthorised access
- € dispose of the information securely in accordance with requirements for retention and disposal of information (see Records Management guidelines)
- € be accessible to allow individuals to find out whether information is held on them, what that information is and the purposes for which the information is used
- € give individuals access to information held about them without excessive delay or expense
- € check personal information to ensure that it is accurate, up to date, relevant, complete and not misleading
- € not disclose information unless the reason directly relates to the purpose it was collected for, and the person to whom it relates is aware that the disclosure usually occurs, or it is disclosed to prevent or lessen a threat to the life and health of any individual.
- € not disclose information relating to ethnicity, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, health or sexual activities except to prevent death or injury
- € not disclose the personal information to any person or organisation outside NSW unless a privacy law exists in that state/territory or the disclosure is permitted under a privacy code of practice

Most of the oral history we do is landscape, or place based. As part of this the DEC adheres to the principles of the Australia ICOMOS Charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance, (The Burra Charter)

## 3.2 Establishing a Project

As with any project, an oral history project usually starts with an idea. If you are familiar with the practice of oral history then establishing a project will be straightforward enough, but even so there are some questions that you will need to ask yourself each time you embark on a new project. It will also be beneficial to revisit some of the following questions at various stages throughout your project.

How will the project contribute to DEC understanding, management and conservation of cultural heritage?

How will your project contribute to the broader public's perception and knowledge of cultural heritage?

Who will you interview? Why? How? Where?

How will the people you are proposing to interview benefit from involvement in the project?

Have you adequate funding, equipment, time and appropriate support to conduct the project?

How will you promote the project?

What will happen to the recordings and associated material you have created once the project is complete?

### 3.3 Research

Once you have answered such questions you will be able to develop your project plan and consider who you might approach for an interview. During this research phase you should spend time carrying out background research using books, historical and contemporary maps, newspapers, photographs, film and other sources including the DEC's own internal files, archives, reports and correspondence. Local libraries with local studies collections can be an important source of information, as are historical societies, specialist libraries such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), or government department libraries, particularly if your project focuses on a particular land use, or theme. Preliminary research is vital because it enables you to develop an understanding of the period, place and themes. As well, it will enable you to develop interviews that will contribute to our historical understanding by adding vital new knowledge, not merely reiterating existing facts. You will be able to pose specific questions, or ask follow up questions, that you may not have been able to without preparation. Preliminary research also enables you to demonstrate interest in your subject and the place, or historical circumstances around a person's life.

### 3.4 Mapping Memory

A significant portion of our work in oral history is place based. People's lives and memories move across the landscape in the course of remembering their past. We inhabit places, and we travel through a multitude over the course of our lives. We shape places we occupy and they in turn give shape to our lives. When people situate themselves in the landscape they invariably mention a series of places that may initially appear unrelated. It is in the context of an individual's life that such landscapes and places acquire meaning, contributing to their personal narratives and sense of self. For the DEC such work is important because it enables us to map places that may better encapsulate the full spectrum of people's lives and historical experience. It may also safeguard against the fragmentation and categorisation of places according to site type and the attendant loss of meaning that we all lament.

This emphasis on place means that the information people share with us will have a spatial and temporal dimension. Yet often when people talk about places that they know well they often communicate their memories without providing enough background information for you to know the location of the place, its extent, its fabric, or how it relates or connects to the broader landscape. If you have developed *rappport* with the person you are interviewing you may find they say things like, 'Uncle Jim lived near the river on Hill Billy Station.' For argument's sake, let's suppose that Hill Billy Station has a frontage to the river of several kilometres and yet when you try to elicit a precise location you get the following response, 'Oh it was just up from the bend, under a big red gum.' There are a number of ways you can translate oral information that is focused on landscapes and places. One of the best ways to map memory accurately is to interview people in the landscape, or at the places they remember and which are significant to them. We discuss this practice further in the section titled, 'Approaching People & Arranging Interviews'. Suffice to say here that visiting the places people remember is often extremely productive. In many instances, not only does the landscape provide atmosphere, it acts as a powerful *aide memoir*. It also enables you to accurately map, or plot, remembered places and you may uncover other stories and memories revealing new

information about how a place was once used, what it looked like and how it has changed. Depending on what equipment you have access to you may be able to record places using a hand held global positioning system (GPS), or more simply using topographical maps or aerial photographs.

Ideally any place-based information you collect should be incorporated onto one or other of the information registers managed by the DEC Cultural Heritage Division. But perhaps you are investigating places that are already recorded on the registers and you are focussed on augmenting the existing record. At present the two registers managed by the Cultural Heritage Information Systems Section have different capacities to deal with memory based places. Whilst both require similar data to define a place's location, the systems diverge in how memory, or people's association to places is recorded.

The Historic Heritage Information Management System (HHIMS) enables people's knowledge and memories of places to be recorded as a specific reference record. The record, including a number of comments or statements, may then be linked or attached to an individual item or multiple items. Associations with items may also be created in HHIMS. This function may be used to group places, items and locations that illustrate a particular theme or period. The association record may also have a range of memory references attached to it.

Memory in the Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) is recorded differently and reflects the potential sensitivity of such information. The AHIMS can record non-relic-based features that are part of a site's cultural significance. Examples may include stories about conflict, massacres, violence, ceremony and Dreaming stories. Such features are part of the record rather than a link. Association may also be used in AHIMS to link multiple sites based on a common theme or interrelationship.

Of course mapping the memories of places associated with an individual life raises interesting questions. Is one person's life, or the places remembered by that particular individual really significant?

Are we asking questions about places that are significant to communities or groups of people? How does the information we collect contribute to our understanding of landscapes and places? Whilst this is not the place for a lengthy discussion regarding such questions it is worth discussing the contribution of individuals to our understanding and conservation of landscapes and places. Many of the landscapes and places the DEC cares for are characterised by absences, particularly in regard to Aboriginal people's presence in the post-contact landscape. Oral history with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in a defined geographic area enables us to represent people's experience and interaction with places across the landscape. Whilst it is true to say that a place visited by an individual may not be assessed as being of cultural heritage significance, these subtle and intimate places do help us to evolve more complex understandings of our relationships to land. By recording several individual oral histories focused on the same landscape overlays, commonalities and differences emerge. Some memories will cohere around specific places, whilst others will exist without collective or communal dimensions.

### 3.5 Who Shall I Interview?

You may already know the answer to the question posed above. Through your work you may have encountered a person, or a group of people, that have important stories to tell about a particular landscape, place, event, period or experience. Frequently people visit parks and tell DEC staff of their experiences or memories of places. If contact details have been kept you will already have a group of people that may be willing to contribute to an oral history project. If, however, you don't have anyone in mind there are a number of ways you can identify individuals within the community that may have knowledge of the subject you are interested in researching. Depending on funding you may be able to place an advertisement in a local newspaper, or other papers such as the *Koori Mail* or ethnic press. An advertisement is not only a good way of promoting your project; it can also be used to encourage people to contact you if they have stories, or information they wish to contribute. If your funds won't stretch to an advertisement you could write a short article or

letter about the project and submit it to the local paper. Some local radio stations are happy to promote oral history projects and may mention the project as part of a community bulletin board or local history program.

Other alternatives include contacting local community groups, historical societies, Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALC), elders groups, nursing homes and even schools. If you are researching a landscape, or a place, identifying former landowners, and or neighbours using local government records is often useful. Talking about your project with people you meet and with colleagues and friends may also provide you with a number of potential interviewees. Another method is to organise a 'Back To' event where people are invited back to a particular place to celebrate their connection to it, catch up with people that they mightn't have seen for years, and reminisce and share stories. On the day you can collect the names and addresses of people that may be willing to contribute to an oral history project and get some idea of the potential or value of their experience to your project.

When assembling a group of potential interviewees consider whether they have had actual experience of the subject. You should also strive to get a good mix of individuals, look for both males and females, and people of different ages and backgrounds so that you gather a range of different perspectives. At this stage you should record what information you have about each potential interviewee. It should include their name, address, telephone number, what information they are likely to have, and the name of the person that suggested you should approach them for an interview. At this point you may choose to establish individual interviewee files, but bear in mind that all the people you approach may not be willing to be interviewed, or have the information or experience you are interested in. Often it is better done once you have made contact by telephone and followed up with a letter, and or visit, prior to recording an interview.

### 3.6 Approaching People & Arranging Interviews

There are a number of ways that you can approach your potential interviewees. A telephone call is a convenient and easy way to reach people. The purpose of the call should be to introduce yourself and explain the reason why you are calling. You should also let the person know how you got their name and telephone number. You can use the call to outline your project. By posing a few questions you should be able to get some indication as to whether the person has information that is pertinent to your research. During the course of your conversation you will generally be able to make the decision about whether or not you wish to interview the person. Rather than describing your project as oral history and then having to tell a person that you don't wish to interview them, it is easier to explain your project as research until you decide that they would be a good interviewee. Not all people communicate well on the telephone and you may feel unable to make a decision about whether or not to ask them if they would be willing to be interviewed. In this case you may ask them if you could meet with them to talk further about your work.

Where in an initial telephone conversation you have arranged a visit to discuss the project further it is a good idea to provide them with written confirmation. The letter should also include information about your project. You may think it appropriate to enclose the project brief, or excerpts from it. Alternatively you may wish to develop a brief description of your project specifically for potential interviewees. Include in your letter details regarding the interviewee's involvement, explaining such things as how many meetings are involved, what each would entail and the subjects you are interested in talking to them about. Preliminary meetings are usually worthwhile, they enable you to meet the potential interviewee, gather some background information and also decide if their life memories are valuable in the context of your research. At a preliminary meeting you can also explain more about your project, tell the person how much time they will need to keep free, what the interview will cover and what their involvement in the project will entail should they be willing to participate.

During your first meeting you should mention their involvement in reading and correcting a summary, log, or interview transcript, as well as how the material from the interview will be used. If you are intending to add additional places to the CHD information registers, write a book, produce a radio program, a report, a planning document, or develop a brochure or interpretative signage, you will need to be clear on what the interviewee's role will be during the development of such outcomes. This is also the time to discuss the use of DEC Information Agreements. It is a good idea to leave an Agreement with the person so they can consider how they would like their information to be managed before they record an interview.

Without being rude you should try to keep the meeting brief. If you are faced with the situation where someone starts revealing their life memories it is best handled by saying something positive such as, 'It would be great if you could tell me that story during the interview, today I just wanted to get some preliminary information and explain a bit more about the project'. If the person is happy to be involved in your project you should arrange a suitable time for an interview. Some people will not wish to contribute to your project and you should respect their right to refuse. Other people may be willing to talk further to you but may object to a recorded interview, in which case you will need to take notes during your discussions and then return a typed version of your notes to the informant for correction.

### 3.7 Where to interview?

By visiting the person you can also make a judgement about where it might be best to record an interview. Often place based interviewing is best undertaken in the field. This technique of journeying to places with people can be extremely informative. In some instances the person may not have been to the place for several years and returning acts as a cue for a whole range of memories that seated at a kitchen table, or in a lounge room would not have emerged. You may, however, find that some people become quite confused, or disorientated, when you take them to a remembered place they haven't been to for years. Often the landscape has changed, there is perhaps more scrub around, or buildings might have fallen into

disrepair, in such circumstances you should reassure people and let them take the time they need to familiarise themselves with the landscape. Frequently, once people get their bearings, or locate a particular feature, the rest ‘falls into place’ and they are then able to describe the place and how it differs from their memory of it. A combination of interviewing people in the field and at home works well if you have the time and budget. Often an initial interview at home using aerial photographs or maps is a good start and gets people thinking about a specific area of land and or particular places. You may choose to do a follow up interview in the field to help stimulate further stories or memories, or to confirm the location of places.

If you are interviewing in the field you need and you travel with your interviewee in a DEC car to a specific place you and your passenger are covered as you would be in your own car in the case of injury or death. If you are travelling in a 4wd you will need to have completed a 4wd training course for you and your passenger to be covered. In all instances you should have an approved itinerary and a description of the activity and the informant’s involvement prior to undertaking any fieldwork. You should familiarise yourself with the DEC Motor Vehicle Best Practice Guide, (March 2001), where you will find more specific advice on what to do should you an accident occur resulting in personal injury and vehicular damage.

When people with first-hand information about a landscape or place visit a DEC office you may feel that it presents an ideal opportunity to interview them. Yet generally such practice is not recommended. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the visitor has probably not come to the office with the express purpose of recording an interview. People need time to prepare for interviews and likewise interviewers need time to research their subject and prepare questions appropriate to the individual’s background and experience. Any one landscape or place that we manage will have a multiplicity of uses that may be grouped into periods and themes. A person with first-hand knowledge of the place may have information about a specific phase of occupation and use, or innumerable phases. It is unlikely therefore that staff on duty will have sufficient background information to enable them to get the most out of an

impromptu interview. Secondly, people may visit a landscape or place with family or friends and may only have limited time to do and see all the things they want. Interviews can be time consuming and draining; they require acute concentration and commitment. As such it may be inappropriate to ask someone if they are willing to be interviewed and you should not pressure an individual to do so simply because it is convenient for you. What might be appropriate if a person tells you that they have information about a place is to have a brief form that can be filled in by them that provides some basic information including:

- € Full name
- € Address
- € Phone number
- € Relationship to place
- € Period of attachment
- € Personal mementos, photos, documents etc. that relate to the place
- € If they know of, or are in contact with, other individuals with similar experiences
- € Whether they would be interested in recording their memories as part of a DEC oral history project in the future.

This information could also be recorded straight onto a computer database or video camera but will require staff to have easy access to such equipment and be proficient in its use.

## 4 Interviewing People

### 4.1 Preparing Questions

Background research also helps in the preparation of interview questions. As you are reading through various sources you can start preparing a list of subjects that can be grouped in logical order. A chronological approach is often best at this early stage and can be followed during an interview as people generally find it easier to remember their lives chronologically. You will need to spend some time thinking about how to ask questions and develop a mixture of question types. You should avoid suggesting answers, sometimes referred to as leading questions. Instead you should ask people to explain, or describe, their motives or feelings. There will of course be questions that require precise answers such as, ‘where were you born?’ In fact every interview should cover basic information including the date and place of birth, mother’s, father’s and sibling’s names and occupations. You will need to give careful consideration to how you will elicit descriptions, emotions, smells, sounds, feelings and experiences. Remember the best interviews are informative, engaging and spontaneous.

### 4.2 The Interview

For even the most experienced oral historians interviewing people can be nerve racking and stressful. There are always preliminary nerves to overcome and as an interviewer you should do your best to put the person you are interviewing at ease. Reassure them, perhaps by acknowledging it is usual to feel nervous when confronted by a tape recorder. Most people, however, quickly forget that the recorder is whirring away and that they are talking to a relative stranger.

There are other ways you can ensure both yourself and the interviewee are relaxed and talk naturally so that the interview progresses smoothly. First make sure you are both seated

comfortably, in a quiet place free from distractions. If you are interviewing in the field, however, it is generally more demanding. Often you will be trying to manage a tape recorder, microphone, camera, note pad, pen and water bottle. The wind may be blowing and you may be walking through thick scrubby country whilst your interviewee is moving from place to place remembering. In such circumstances it's a good idea to carry a shoulder bag with several compartments in which you can stow your equipment so that your hands are free to hold the microphone or tree branches as the case may be. Often when interviewing in the field you can find a comfortable shady spot to sit and record, or you may find that you can walk from place to place with the recorder off only switching it on when you reach the various remembered places. If you choose to record an interview in this way you should ensure that either you or your informant introduces each place before you begin to talk about it. An introduction may say something like; "we are now standing outside the Hill Billy woolshed at Blue Gum National Park". This will enable not only you to remember what places are being talked about but will provide future researchers with the information they need to 'see' and learn about the same places.

Keep your questions short and clear, you should have already familiarised yourself with the different types of questions and the ways that they can be asked. Avoid interrupting, but by all means tell your interviewee that they can interrupt or stop the interview at any time. Listen patiently, silently and carefully, and with your body language try and be as reassuring as you can. Where appropriate maintain good eye contact, smile, and nod, empathise and gently encourage with non-verbal communication. Try to avoid using standard verbal forms of acknowledgment such as 'mm's', "ums", "really!" and "I know!" Lastly, don't rush and don't jump from subject to subject. It's a good idea to have a list of subject headings and a range of prompts or questions arranged under each. If possible, you should conduct the interview with paper and pen to hand so that you can write down any proper names, figures of speech, items that you are uncertain of so that you can clarify them after the interview.

Interviewing is both extremely demanding and deeply rewarding. It requires a great deal of concentration. During the interview you need

to be aware of your equipment, how the interviewee is coping, considering whether they are they tiring, restless, uncomfortable or emotionally upset by a specific subject or question. You need to be spontaneous enough to ask questions that will naturally arise out of the answers you receive. But you must also be mindful of your purpose so you avoid recording an interview that is not relevant to your project, or rambles aimlessly, or is cursory because it tries to cover an entire life history in sixty minutes. Interviewing is a learned skill and your efforts will be repaid several times over as your interviewees entrust you with their feelings, experiences and memories.

### 4.3 Equipment

Below are a few tips that should ensure you are well prepared for an interview and you achieve the best technical standard possible.

1. Use a cassette tape-recorder with a recording meter. Experiment with your equipment before going to the interview. Have an extension cord, extra tapes and batteries on hand should the need arise.
2. Test your equipment when you arrive.
3. Remember that cassette tapes have a few seconds of 'lead time' and do not begin to record the moment you turn on the machine.
4. Use good quality, sixty-minute cassette tapes; longer tapes are more likely to break and shorter ones do not provide enough time on each side.
5. Don't store used or unused tapes in a hot, cold, humid, or dusty place. The back window or dashboard of an automobile, for example, is not the best place to carry tapes to or from an interview.
6. Record the date, place and names of the participants at the beginning of the interview. This should be done informally.

7. Do not record near air conditioners in the summer or heating vents in the winter. Check electrical circuits for possible interference.
8. When a cassette reaches the end of side one turn it over to side two without rewinding it.
9. If your recorder does not 'click off' automatically at the end of one side of the cassette, remember to watch the time and change the tape.
10. Punch out the 'tabs' on the cassette immediately after you finish with it, but not before. This ensures that what you have recorded cannot be erased.
13. If you are using an outside microphone, keep it on a small stand. Do not handle the microphone while recording.
14. If you are using an outside microphone, do not pass it back and forth.
15. Cassette tapes come in a case. Keep the case. It protects the tape from dust.
16. Never use the same tape for interviews with more than one person.
17. Never use the same tape for more than one session of an interview with the same person.
18. Label your tapes. Write the narrator's name and the date on each side of each tape. For example: 'Mary Smith, January 2, 2002, tape 1, side 2.' If one side of a cassette is blank, write 'blank' on that side.

## 4.4 After the Interview

After you turn off the tape recorder, don't rush off. Take the time to relax with and talk to the person you have just interviewed. For many people, particularly older people, recording an interview is a significant event. They may have limited contact with people and your visit might be the first conversation they have had in many days. It is also likely that they haven't talked about their lives and shared the memories they have shared with you for many years. You should take the opportunity to reassure your interviewee, explain what you thought of the interview, how valuable their contribution will be to the project and how your understanding about the subject has been enhanced. You can also use the time to ask them if they have any photographs, or other personal records, if you haven't done so already, and to answer any questions they may have about the project. You may also choose to check spellings, places and people's names, and talk again about the DEC Information Agreement. Some people may be prepared to sign an Agreement at this point, whilst others will need more time to consider their options and discuss their views with family and or friends. It can be a good time to reiterate what you will do, such as provide them with a copy of the tape or tapes, return a copy of the transcript of the interview (if one is prepared) so that they can review, correct or withdraw it. Always leave the interviewee with an address and telephone number where you can be contacted.

## 5 Processing Oral History Interviews

### 5.1 Transcribing

There are a number of ways you can process and make use of the interviews you have collected. And both the processing and presentation will depend on the available resources, your time frame and intended outcome. Your project may warrant the preparation of transcripts. A transcript is a full written version of the recorded interview. They are invaluable for researchers because it is much quicker and simpler to scan several pages of printed text than listen to several hours of interview tapes, particularly if you are not sure the interview covers a topic you are interested in. Getting recorded interviews transcribed, however, is time consuming and quite expensive. Generally a one-hour interview will take a professional transcriber four or more hours to prepare. It may take longer, particularly if the recording is of poor quality, or the voices are unclear. Charges vary depending on experience but expect to pay between \$20 to \$35 per hour.

Typically it is the transcriber's job to type word-for-word what they hear on the tape so that the transcription is an accurate record of the interview. There are stylistic conventions that enable transcribers to more precisely capture the content of recorded interviews. A brief style guide is presented below and should be supplied to the preferred transcriber before they commence work. The following is taken from *On The Record: A Practical Guide to Oral History* by Paul Ashton, North Sydney, NSW; North Sydney Municipal Council, 1991

[ ] Square brackets are to be placed around interpolations such as we caught it there [Sturt National Park]
( ) Parenthesis are used to include information about actions such as (coughs), (clucks tongue)
∞ Dash should be used to signify changes or breaks
‘ ‘ Single commas are used to enclose slang, books, songs, radio or television programs, quotes
“ “ Double commas should be used when the interviewee is quoting someone else’s speech, such as Mr Brown told me “This country has become much scrubbier since 1963”
* The 3 points of ellipsis are used to mark omissions, interruptions, indecisiveness.
* . The 4 points of ellipsis should be used at the end of an unfinished sentence which runs into a new sentence
<i>Italics</i> Italics and underlining should be used to indicate book or film title, works of art or music: or where emphasis was added in the spoken word

Often it is recommended that transcribers be asked to remove, or edit, the words that all we use in our speech such as “You know” “I mean”, “um”, “uh huh”. The Oral History Association recommends that such crutch words, fill in sounds and false starts should be omitted from the transcript so as to improve its readability.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Beth M Robertson, *Oral History Handbook*, Oral History Association of Australia, South Australian Branch Inc., 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1996, p53.

## 5.2 Interview Summaries

Often it is not necessary to prepare interview transcripts. If you have conducted the interviews yourself and are using them to inform your research and writing it may be sufficient to transcribe specific sections of the interview. Yet it is advisable to create some written record of the interview and the convention most frequently used is an interview summary, or log. A summary should include the following basic information, the interview participants, where the interview was recorded, the date, the project the tape relates to and the interviewee's biographical details. The summary should also provide an overview of the interview including a basic outline of the topics covered in the order in which they were discussed and some commentary about the quality of the recording and the information it contains. If the interview is not entirely satisfactory you should say so. You may, for example, have discovered that your interviewee tired quickly, or that his or her recollections were not as clear or detailed as expected. If this was your experience you should briefly note it taking care not to express it in negative terms that may offend or shame your interviewee.

## 5.3 Interview Logs

Interview logs are a great way to make interviews accessible. Logs are quite quick and easy to prepare and provide slightly more information in a different format to a summary. Conventions for preparing logs involve writing down the time, subjects and proper names mentioned during the course of the interview. Below is an example of a typical interview log set out in three columns with an area at the top of the each page for basic information about the interview participants, place of interview, date, and biographical details of the interviewee. Information included in an interview log should be concise and accurate. The subject column is not intended for lengthy description but it should provide some insight in general terms into the aspects of the subjects that are covered. This kind of information will not only aid your own memory about the interview but will help future researchers evaluate whether the interview is pertinent to their research. In the proper names column you should

record the places and names that are talked about. It is not the place to record names and places that are only made in passing reference. As you are compiling your proper names column it is useful to have your notes from the interview where you have noted the correct spelling of names and places. If you didn't have an opportunity to check spellings after the interview be sure to confirm they are accurate with your interviewee. Sometimes a telephone call is a good way to do this, otherwise it can be done when the log is returned to the interviewee for checking.

For a one hour tape try not to make your interview log longer than four or five A4 pages. If you prepare an interview log while the interview is fresh in your mind you will save yourself considerable time and effort.

<p><b>Karen Reed, DEC Ranger, interviewing Mr Peter Timothy Bloggs, born 1921, at his home 54 Curtin Drive, Dubbo, NSW, on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2002 for Memories Project.</b></p> <p><b>TAPE 2002/05, TAPE 1/1, SIDE A.</b></p>		
<b>TIME</b>	<b>SUBJECTS</b>	<b>PROPER NAMES</b>
0.00	Provides biographical information regarding parents	John Timothy Bloggs Mary Louise Bloggs (nee Smith)
2.00	Talks in detail about how his parents met in Wellington and moved to Hill Billy Station	Wellington Hill Billy Station
10.00	Describes his early schooling 1927-1932 and the governess who taught him, as well as his frustration at having to attend lessons when he really wanted to be helping his dad on Hill Billy Station	Miss Emma Strict John Timothy Bloggs Hill Billy Station

## 5.4 Interviewee's Involvement

As your project progresses interviewees should be kept informed. They should have a clear understanding of each stage of the project so that they know what to expect. This is an essential part of good project planning and management. Your discussions and any written documentation you provide regarding your project should have clearly stated what they will receive, (ie copies of the interview on tape, summary, log or transcript) what is required of them and the time they will need to for each phase of the project. If summaries, logs or transcripts are prepared you should always return them to your interviewees for verification and approval. If possible it is best to undertake this process in person. However, it may not be practical for you to visit each person again in which case it is best to telephone your interviewee telling them they should expect to receive a written record of the interview and that they will be required to read over it and make corrections as necessary. You should also suggest to that it is a good idea to read through the transcript whilst listening to the recorded interview. When sending the transcript or written version of the interview back to the interviewee you should clearly mark the sections that you need them to clarify. Places, names and dates are commonly confused so it is important to double check with the interviewee that what is written down is correct as far as they remember. Of course there will be instances where people remember a date incorrectly or they will not pick up a mis-spelling. By necessity this means you will have to contact the person explaining the problem, more often than not you will be able to solve it.

Upon viewing the written record of their interview the person may wish to change, restrict or withdraw parts of the interview. Many interviewers and interviewees are quite shocked when they first see their spoken words written down. Some people may feel embarrassed about they way they speak, or the way they have explained various subjects. At this point it is important to reassure people, gently reminding them that they should concentrate on correcting any spelling mistakes or factual errors. They should resist the urge to rewrite their spoken words though they may wish to add extra written information.

For some people reading and correcting a transcript is very demanding. Any number of problems may confront people when they are asked to review a transcript. Such things as poor reading ability, illness, visual impairment, or lack of time could mean your request is a difficult or impossible task. You should present such people with alternatives. Often arranging a visit to read the transcript is a good way to make corrections and keep the project on track. If you haven't done so already it is often an opportunity to return personal photographs or other memorabilia, as well as to finalise an information agreement. Once you have taken in the corrections you should forward a copy of the final version of the transcript to the interviewee.

If the interviewee has not already signed an DEC Information Agreement you should endeavour to finalise one with them at this point, or after you have taken in the corrections suggested by them. They should be given a copy for their own records and copies should be held on relevant DEC files and with the transcripts and recordings.

## 5.5 Copyright & Ethics

Copyright and the ethics associated with oral history are often perceived as the most difficult issues around such work. Nevertheless, we need to deal with both in a clear, comprehensible and professional manner so as to ensure that the work we do contributes to people's confidence in the DEC and provides a richer understanding of our history and heritage.

Expectations regarding our professional and ethical conduct are detailed in the DEC Corporate Plan, in the Guidelines for Professional & Ethical Conduct and various policy documents. Whilst most of these documents don't explicitly deal with oral history ethics they outline responsibilities which are applicable to all work and are worth remembering in this context. Our corporate values, particularly, acknowledging and respecting the rights and views of people, being fair and equitable, and contributing to the integrity and reputation of the agency are all relevant to oral history.

The Oral History Association of Australia's Guidelines of Ethical Practice are useful and outline the responsibilities of interviewers. Many of the principles are already well-reflected in DEC documents.

The Commonwealth Copyright Act 1968 describes the law as it relates to copyright, as do precedents set by the decisions of courts. Copyright protects a diverse range of material such as dance, plays, artistic works, and musical works, written material and sound recordings. Most commonly, copyright as it relates to oral history is believed to exist in both the taped interview and in the words recorded on the tape. It has been argued that a written work derived from the recorded interview, such as a transcription needs to be created before it is protected by copyright. Yet this opinion is probably outdated given the diverse range non-literary forms and technologies that are now common. Copyright in sound recordings lasts for fifty years and the copyright symbol is (P).

Copyright owners have exclusive rights to the material they have created. Owners are able to reproduce their work and make it public. This may include playing an interview in public, or broadcasting an excerpt from an interview using any technological form. These rights mean that if you want to use material protected by copyright you will need obtain permission from the copyright owner.

Generally under copyright law, the creator owns copyright in the first instance. However, there are circumstances where this is not the case. At DEC for example because we are 'creating' the sound recordings as part of our normal duties the agency owns the copyright.<sup>9</sup> Volunteers, freelancers, or oral historians may be required to assign their copyright to DEC. If however, a consultant is engaged using a standard DEC Contract for Services copyright is automatically owned by the DEC 'on all material prepared or collected in connection with the project'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Information sheet G10, Copyright in Australia: an introduction, Australian Copyright Council.

<sup>10</sup> See DEC Contract for Services, General Conditions.

However, the DEC now acknowledges that it is not the rightful owner of all information that has been given to us, or collected by us or on our behalf. This is particularly true for oral history. It is both practical and ethical to negotiate information agreements with people. Such agreements enable people to exercise their moral and intellectual rights with regard to the information they provide to us. They can control the way we use and store their information, as well as access to it in the future. A model agreement is included in the Cultural Heritage Information Policy. Staff should also consult the DEC Privacy and Personal Information Protection Policy and DEC's Guidelines for Professional and Ethical Conduct. The Australian Copyright Council provides extensive information of many aspects of copyright. They are located at 245 Chalmers Street, Redfern NSW 2016, phone (02) 9318 1788, or fax (02) 9698 3536, or [www.copyright.org.au](http://www.copyright.org.au)

## 6 Telling Other People

### 6.1 Ways to Present Oral History

Oral history can be used in a range of ways. Your project plan should have clearly defined your subject, themes, outcomes and audience. You may have started your research so as to identify places of cultural importance, or to record the memories of a group of individuals and their connections to a protected area, or to uncover the lived history of a specific place. Whatever questions you were seeking answers to, the interview questions, summaries, logs, or transcripts, should not be seen as the only outcome of your project. Your project plan should include other realistic and achievable outcomes that will enable the oral evidence you have gathered to reach a broader audience. Excerpts from the interviews, combined with any photographs, maps or personal items could be used for a newspaper or magazine article, or a display in a local library, Local Aboriginal Land Council office, Keeping Place, or DEC office. Perhaps you have expertise in a particular area, or you can team up with someone that does, so together you can produce a brochure, interpretative signage, publication, audio walking guide, a radio or

television program, website, CD Rom, or a short film or video. Whatever the planned outcome is you will also need to give careful consideration to how you will make history from the interviews you have collected.

## 6.2 Making History from Life Stories

In order to make history from the recorded interviews you have collected they will need to be analysed and interpreted. That is, you will need to relate the memories people have shared with you to the wider the social, political and economic context. Like other forms of evidence you will need to analyse, assess and ultimately shape the oral information or memories into history, remembering of course that oral history is subjective, and does not present an unmediated view of the past. There are a number of ways you can grapple with such a task. Perhaps you have interviewed an individual who has an extraordinarily clear and detailed memory. In such instances you may choose to record a number of interviews with that one person and use their life story to craft a narrative which relates their life to broader historical shaping forces. Some people's life stories provide a really powerful lens through which the experience of a particular group can be projected. Oral histories may also be grouped together as a collection of stories that enable a range of different voices to be related to the wider historical context. If the interviews you have collected are place based, or focus on a specific landscape, they typically fall into this form of presentation which is a highly effective way to deal with a diverse range of life experiences and perspectives. Another method is to analyse the oral evidence you have and incorporate it into a broader historical argument. Such an approach will require the evidence included in each interview be compared and contrasted, and generally means that far less of each interview is likely to be included in the final piece of writing. It is not uncommon to find when you come to analyse your interviews and weave them into a logical historical argument that there are omissions or gaps in your research and questions emerge that you hadn't considered previously. Sometimes such queries can be quickly remedied, in other instances it may be necessary to re-interview people.

Perhaps you are not intending to use the interviews you have collected to write history. You may wish to present your interviews as a compilation of voices that speak of life, significant places and landscape in the past. Even without reference to the broader historical context and the things that might have influenced people's lives, the collection of interviews you have will reveal a variety of different experiences, stories and memories of the same landscape, place or event. If you choose to present the interviews as a collection of individual life and landscape stories you should explain that is how the interviews appear in your publication, report or other outcome. You could say something like, 'in this report we have chosen not to place these oral histories in a broader historical context, but rather to allow each person to speak for themselves and voice the personal story of their past'. If in preparing the stories you notice that two stories contradict each other, or might confuse the reader, you can always provide a brief explanation by using footnotes or endnotes. Alternatively you could place a sentence or two in brackets in the body of the text to avoid misunderstandings.

### 6.3 What Happened to My Words?

The presentation of any oral evidence will require some form of editing. The extent to which you edit will be dictated largely by the form you choose. If you choose to use the experience of an individual to talk about the broader historical context you will obviously be using a significant proportion of their oral evidence along side other forms of evidence. If, however, you intend to present the interviews as a collection of stories, you may, depending on the number of people you have interviewed, decide to dedicate a certain amount of air time, in the case of film or broadcast, or page space to each person in the case of a book. Obviously if you use the interviews as a body of evidence you will ultimately present less of each interview, though the views or experiences of some people may be used as examples to illustrate specific points.

There are other options that will require forethought and may also warrant prior discussion with interviewees. You will need to consider how you intend to treat the written version of the spoken

word. Do you intend to re-write, or paraphrase, what people have told you using your own words, or are you going to quote them? Do you think it is necessary to change the wording, grammar, and syntax? Will you involve the people you have interviewed in the process? Given one of the reasons we collect oral evidence is to gain some insight into how living people experience and remember the past, it is important to preserve the individual voices of the people you have interviewed. Yet editing people's words carefully and sensitively can, in some cases, save people the embarrassment of being confronted by feelings of inadequacy when presented with verbatim quotes from their interview.

## 6.4 A Change in Plans

Sometimes because the evidence you have collected is different to what you initially envisaged, project outcomes might need to be revised. You may have initially wanted to publish a book that incorporated the oral histories you collected, but found upon evaluation the material was suited to a different outcome. It is also likely that interviewees will have their own ideas about what form the information should take.<sup>11</sup> There are other factors which may alter outcomes including changes to budget allocations, DEC decisions which may not be related to your project but which may effect it by changing community attitudes. Perhaps it is a change in direction from management, or personal matters that alter your ability to carry out the project. If your circumstances or outcomes change, you should as a courtesy, keep the people that have contributed to the project informed.

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<sup>11</sup> In some communities there is still resistance to multimedia and hypermedia, you need to be mindful of this and discuss outcomes with people during the early stages. Often printed outcomes are preferred.

## 7 Engaging an Oral Historian

Up until this point these guidelines assume that you will be undertaking the oral history project yourself. This is not always the case, and there will be oral history projects that will require you to engage a consultant. This section is therefore focussed on that process. Of course there are a number of other tasks you will still need to undertake. Amongst other things a brief will need to be written, you will need to decide how you are going to bring your project to the attention of suitable consultants, evaluate their submissions, manage the project and provide feedback on the consultant's work. Each of these tasks necessitates you possess a good understanding of oral history methodology and practice.

In the first instance assistance is available through the Cultural Heritage Division. Some staff have professional qualifications in oral history and or hands-on experience in collecting oral evidence from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across the State. As well, there are staff that have designed and managed a range of oral history projects. Some examples include oral history projects where professional oral historians, or historians, have been engaged by the DEC to collect information about a particular landscape or place. In other instances staff have commissioned local community members to record interviews with people. Often such people have little or no training in oral history, but they are selected because they are well known within a particular community and have local and or cultural knowledge relevant to the project. Where people with little experience in oral history are commissioned it is often necessary to work closely with them. There are many ways that you can train and support people in this situation. You may be able to provide the consultant with recording equipment that belongs to DEC and provide them with training so that they are able to use it themselves confidently. Another method is to accompany the community consultant and assist in the interview process, by setting up the recording equipment, discussing the project, information agreements and asking questions. This method necessitates that you and your consultant have a clear understanding of your individual roles and responsibilities and that you can comfortably work together.

Organisations such as the Oral History Association may be able to provide you with a list of oral historians appropriate to your project. Alternatively the Professional Historians Association maintains a register of professional historians. Also, a number of consulting firms specialise in oral history work. Some anthropologists and heritage consultants also provide oral history services. You may wish to contact Cultural Heritage Division staff, some of whom are subscribers to professional online discussion lists where notices can be posted about projects.

Consultants responding to a project brief should submit a response that clearly outlines their understanding of the project, the methodology they will use and the skills and experience they have relevant to the tasks. It is perfectly reasonable to request examples of previous work and to interview individuals whom you may think are appropriate for the project. Often a face-to-face interview is a really good way to assess an individual's professional ability and their perception of the project.

## 8 Select Oral History Resources

There is a large literature on oral history. We have provided a brief list of written and on-line references that are useful when planning, or carrying out an oral history project.

Annie Bolitho & Mary Hutchinson, *Out of the Ordinary: Inventive ways of bringing communities, their stories and audiences to light*, Canberra Stories Group, Littlewood, Murrumbateman NSW, 1998.

Louise Douglas, Alan Roberts and Ruth Thompson, *Oral History: A Handbook*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

Lesley Jenkins, *Talking Together: A Guide to Community Oral History Projects*, OHAA, Qld., Inc., 1999.

Louella McCarthy, Paul Ashton and Hamish Graham, *Culture and Heritage: Oral History*, Australia: State of the Environment

Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage), Series 1, Department of Environment, 1997.

Beth M Robertson, *Oral History Handbook*, Oral History Association of South Australia, (South Australian Branch) Adelaide, 2000, 4th Edition.

Penny Taylor, *Telling It Like It Is: A Guide to Making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History*, Aboriginal Studies Press and DEET, Canberra, 1992.

Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History*, William Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1993.

If you use the research sites listed below you will see that there are oral history collections, held in libraries, universities, and even in radio and television archives.<sup>12</sup> For example the New Zealand National Library site demonstrates Maori history as New Zealand's history, there is an oral history component found if you scroll down the page. The First Nations Canada Site includes Chief Kerry's Moose guidebook to land use and occupancy mapping: research design and data collection which is directly relevant to our own work at DEC, particularly in mapping Aboriginal people's attachments to land. The online guidebook advocates the use of elder's oral history to create what is eloquently titled 'the geography of oral tradition'. The Jewish Holocaust site is a remembrance site and illustrates how profoundly painful memories have been recorded with sensitivity and respect. It is our hope that by providing information in this format readers will come to see how the local and place based oral history research that we at DEC are engaged in sits within a wider context.

Canadian Aboriginal Peoples

[http://www.parkscanada.pch.gc.ca/aborig/aborig4\\_e.htm](http://www.parkscanada.pch.gc.ca/aborig/aborig4_e.htm)

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<sup>12</sup> Hard copies of this material can be sent by request. Contact Kath Schilling, Aboriginal Women's Heritage Coordinator, or Sharon Veale, Historian, in Cultural Heritage Division.

First Nations Canada

<http://www.nativemaps.org.chiefkerrysmoos/introduction.html>

[Oral History Association of Australia \[cwpp.slq.qld.gov.au/ohaa/\]\(http://www.oralhistory.org.au/\)](http://www.oralhistory.org.au/)

[International Oral History Association <http://www.ioha.fgv.br>](http://www.ioha.fgv.br)

The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority

<http://yad-vashem.org.il>

## 9 On Line Research Sites

[Aboriginal History Virtual Library](http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/AborigPages/History.html)

<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/AborigPages/History.html>

[ABC Indigenous On Line <http://www.abc.net.au/message>](http://www.abc.net.au/message)

[Australian Law Reform Commission <http://www.alrc.gov.au>](http://www.alrc.gov.au)

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Inlander Studies

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au>

[ATSILIRN](http://www.home.vicnet.net.au/~atsilirn) (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information and Resource Network) <http://www.home.vicnet.net.au/~atsilirn>

[National Library directory of Oral Histories](http://nla.gov.au/ohdir/about.html)

<http://nla.gov.au/ohdir/about.html>

National Library of New Zealand <http://natlib.govt.nz/index1.html>

Newcastle Library Archives

<http://www.library.newcastle.edu.au/archives/>

Northern Territory Library and Information Services

<http://www.dcdsca.nt.gov.au/dcdsca/intranet.nsf/pages/LibraryServices>

State Library of NSW <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au>

State Library of Queensland

<http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/jol/collections>

State Library of South Australia <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/>

State Library of Tasmania <http://www.statelibrary.tas.gov.au/>

State Library of Victoria <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/>

State Library of Western Australia <http://www.liswa.wa.gov.au/>

[University of Technology, Sydney](http://www.uts.edu.au/)

<http://www.publchistory.uts.edu.au/> see especially under ‘Making Histories’ heading.

## 10 Collection & Storage

Department of Environment and Conservation is not a collecting institution, however, investigation, assessment, conservation, education and interpretation invariably means we collect and acquire information. In the Cultural Heritage Division there are two Registers that hold information related to cultural heritage in New South Wales. They are the Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System, (AHIMS), formerly the Aboriginal Sites Register, and the Historic Heritage Information Management System, (HHIMS), formerly the Historic Places Register. Both of these Registers include oral history recordings.

If during the course of your work you have recorded interviews with people and you have retained copies of the tapes it is important to know how best to care for them. For long term storage of audio and visual media the best practice standards are:

- € 18 degrees Celsius, plus or minus 2 degrees
- € 40% relative humidity plus or minus 5%
- € filtered air to exclude dust or other particles
- € well ventilated storage areas
- € non-magnetic, archival quality containers<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'A Strategy for Keeping and Managing NPWS Aboriginal Heritage Information', Draft Report to NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Recordkeeping Systems Pty Ltd, May 2001, piii.

## 11 Concluding comments

Aboriginal People are very often missing from Australia's history. Visit your local library or historical society and find out what they hold about your area's history. In most cases, it will be overwhelmingly non-Aboriginal. Chances are your local Aboriginal community won't rate a mention, and if they do, there is the likelihood it will be in the past tense with words like, 'the last full blood' or a 'lost culture'. But through DEC we all have the opportunity to make a difference, we can help re-place our Aboriginal communities in Australia's history and cultural landscapes, through people's stories and memories about land.

The United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states:

*Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, as well as the right to the restitution of cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.<sup>b</sup> Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.<sup>c</sup>*

A great philosophy but how can it be put into practice? Perhaps we can find a way to give people a chance to have their memories and histories told? Perhaps we can decide on themes and priorities, and through programs that achieve outcomes? Perhaps an outcome might be a greater understanding of the history of the land through the knowledge, memory, and feeling found in our Aboriginal

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<sup>b</sup> Part 111, Article 12

<sup>c</sup> Part 111, Article 14,

communities about their lives on the land and feelings about country? This paper discusses many of the issues that might arise when considering Oral History Projects. Perhaps from here we can move forward with well-guided project themes and methodologies that can help enhance the knowledge of DEC and the wider community. It would be a worthwhile and satisfying achievement.



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