Returning cultural heritage material to Country

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is leading the Return of Cultural Heritage project which is seeking to return Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material from overseas collecting institutions back to its original custodians and owners.

In 2020, Australia will mark the 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook’s voyage to the east coast of Australia. AIATSIS CEO Craig Ritchie said it also marks the start of the process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material being removed overseas.

“AIATSIS believes that as we approach this anniversary every effort needs to be made to secure the return of cultural heritage material to Indigenous communities,” Mr Ritchie said.

The project is being funded by the Australian Government as part of the budget package to mark the anniversary of Captain Cook’s first voyage.

The project has a number of key objectives, including:

- returning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material from overseas collecting institutions;
- supporting the development of relationships between Indigenous communities and overseas institutions to allow communities to tell their stories in their way; and
- developing a database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material held in overseas institutions.

“From talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, we know communities would like material returned – we also know that people want information on which institutions have their material and how it was collected; which is why the development of an accessible database is so important. The database will empower Indigenous communities, providing access to information on their cultural heritage material,” Mr Ritchie said.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have been adversely effected by colonisation – the return of material will give people an opportunity to reconnect with material and revitalise their culture.”

Early engagement is currently underway with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and custodians.

“The project will require extensive consultation across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia to firstly seek approval from relevant custodians and owners about whether material should be returned and to ensure material is managed appropriately and respectfully,” Mr Ritchie said.

“While the project is part of an effort to return material to its original custodians and owners, it does not seek the return of all material held in overseas collections. The project will provide a vehicle for institutions to establish a partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and expand their knowledge and understanding of the material in their collections.”

Media enquiries: Commsmedia@aiatsis.gov.au or P: 0476 843 522

www.aiatsis.gov.au