

# CATALOGUING ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ITEMS

In Victoria there are legal obligations and restrictions regarding the ownership, management and use of Aboriginal cultural heritage. This Victorian Collections information sheet will guide you through the steps for cataloguing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander items in the **Access** section of the online catalogue, which will in turn help you to meet your obligations.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material is diverse. While contemporary items are culturally significant, such items are typically not managed under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*. According to the *Act* and for the purposes of this information sheet, an Aboriginal object means an object, material or thing in Victoria or the coastal waters of Victoria which:

- relates to the Aboriginal occupation of any part of Australia, whether or not the object existed prior to the occupation of that part of Australia by people of non-Aboriginal descent
- (a) is of cultural heritage significance to the Aboriginal people of Victoria; or (b) an object, material or thing in Victoria or the coastal waters of Victoria
- is removed or excavated from an Aboriginal place

It does not include objects that have been made for the purpose of sale (other than an object made for barter or exchange in accordance with Aboriginal tradition); or Aboriginal human remains.

## STEPS

### 1 DISCERN IF SECULAR, SECRET/SACRED OR ANCESTRAL REMAINS

There are different protocols and laws that need to be followed dependent on whether your collection holds secular or secret/sacred Aboriginal cultural heritage or Ancestral Remains.

Often, your organisation will not have the expertise to understand whether an item is secular or secret/sacred. **Make contact with your local Traditional Owners or Registered Aboriginal Party to help you make informed decisions. If you are unsure, begin by contacting Aboriginal Victoria (AV).**

### 2 RECORD ACTIONS TAKEN IN 'ACCESS' SECTION OF CATALOGUE ENTRY

**It is your legal obligation to report any secular cultural heritage material to AV.** For more information on how to make a report, contact AV directly. You will find their contact details in the **Further Resources** section of this information sheet. In your catalogue entry:

a) Record the date the item was reported to AV.

b) Once you have reported the item, it will be placed on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register (VAHR) and will acquire a VAHR identifier. Record this number in **Date Reported to Aboriginal Victoria** and **VAHR Identifier** fields of the Victorian Collections catalogue.

c) If you are aware of the geographic provenance of the item, then contact the most relevant Traditional Owner group to seek advice regarding the management of the item, as well as any other

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information that they would like to pass on. The group will most likely be the Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) for that particular geographic area (although at this stage, not all of Victoria has an associated RAP). Record the details of the organisation and their advice in the Access section of the Victorian Collections catalogue. Ensure you record the name of the organisation, its primary contact person, and their contact details. You should continue to liaise with the organisation regarding the management of the item into the future.

d) The RAP (or other relevant Traditional Owner organisation) will determine the appropriate restrictions to physical and online access to the item. For example, they may advise that an image of the item can be physically and digitally viewed by the public, however its associated narrative information must remain private for cultural reasons. Ensure that you record all the relevant decisions in **Physical Access Requirement** and **Online Access Requirements of the Victorian Collections catalogue** and abide by them.

**It is your legal obligation to report any Secret/Sacred objects or Ancestral Remains to the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council (VAHC).** For more information on how to make a report, contact AV directly. You will find their contact details in the Further Resources section of this information sheet. In your catalogue entry:

a) Record the date that you reported any suspected Secret/Sacred objects or Ancestral Remains to VAHC.

b) Once you have reported the material to the VAHC they are likely to conduct an investigation. On moral and legal grounds, ownership of Secret/Sacred objects and Ancestral Remains lies with Traditional Owners. If VAHC identifies the origins of the material, the relevant community may either request repatriation of the item to themselves, choose to have the item transferred to a different organisation or leave the item in your care. Ensure that you record all the relevant decisions in **Investigation Outcome** and **Deaccession** fields of the Victorian Collections catalogue.

c) If the item is left in your care you may have received instructions regarding its management, such as access requirements. Record these details in the **Access Comments** field of the Victorian Collections catalogue.

## GLOSSARY

**Aboriginal Victoria (AV):** The State Government department responsible for protecting and promoting Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria. AV administers the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* and maintains the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register

**Ancestral Remains:** Aboriginal Ancestral Remains are the whole or part of the body of an Aboriginal person from the past and are often referred to as Ancestors. Further guidance regarding Ancestral Remains is available via the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council: <https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/report-ancestral-remains>

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## ▲ GLOSSARY (cont.)

**Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP):** An organisation which is responsible under Victorian legislation for making decisions relating to the protection of Victorian Aboriginal cultural heritage in a particular geographic area.

**Secret/Sacred objects:** Secret or sacred objects are secret or sacred according to Aboriginal tradition. Further guidance regarding secret or sacred objects is available via the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council: <https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/report-secret-or-sacred-objects>

**Traditional Owners:** 'Traditional Owner group' refers to those people recognised by the Attorney-Genreal as traditional owners, based on their traditional and cultural associations with the land.

**Victorian Aboriginal Herigate Council (VAHC):** The VAHC are responsible for managing reporting of Ancestral Remains and Secret/Sacred objects. In addition to this, VAHC appoint and oversee Registered Aboriginal Parties to protect and manage cultural heritage in Victoria.

**Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register (VAHR):** The VAHR holds information about known Aboriginal cultural heritage places and objects within Victoria. It provides a central repository for Traditional Owners to store information about cultural heritage

## ▲ FURTHER RESOURCES

**Aboriginal Victoria**  
<https://www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au>  
e: [Aboriginalaffairs@dpc.vic.gov.au](mailto:Aboriginalaffairs@dpc.vic.gov.au)  
p: 1800 762 003

**Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council**  
<https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au>  
e: [VAHC@dpc.vic.gov.au](mailto:VAHC@dpc.vic.gov.au)  
p: 7004 7198

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