

# TRACKING THE ATSILIRN PROTOCOLS: MAINTAINING THE FOCUS ON INDIGENOUS LIBRARY ISSUES

**Alana Garwood-Houng**

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
alana.garwood-houng@aiatsis.gov.au

## **ABSTRACT**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives, and Information Services (Protocols) was published in 1995 in conjunction with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resources Network (ATSILIRN).

The Protocols address issues and concerns related to Indigenous materials held in libraries, archives and other information services, as well as those related to the provision of services for Indigenous people. The Protocols serve as a guide to assist library, archive and information service providers when handling Indigenous materials and interacting with Indigenous peoples.

In 2004 a project was undertaken to determine whether the Protocols are a useful strategy for highlighting Indigenous information issues and promoting responses to them, to identify any emerging issues which may need to be included, and to collect professional comment on how they could be improved. The project was called 'Mapping the impact of the 1995 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services' project.

A new website for the Protocols was launched at the ATSILIRN conference in November 2006, with many changes and additions. At the ATSILIRN conference in April 2008 the Protocols were workshopped and further updated.

This paper will track the Protocols from their inception through their changes, up to the latest version and the footprints they have left for others to follow.

## TRACKING THE ATSILIRN PROTOCOLS: MAINTAINING THE FOCUS ON INDIGENOUS LIBRARY ISSUES

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, on which we are meeting today.

I would like to start by quoting Rachel Perkins,

We have something profound to be proud of in this country. We have the longest continuing culture in the world – in the world!!!! One would think that this extraordinary culture would be at the centre of Australian culture – but is far from it. Australians as a people, as individuals, have not embraced our culture as part of their heritage----, as part of being Australian. (Perkins 2008)

And as the National Policy Framework states, *Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are the first people and Traditional owners of Australia.*

Now here are some questions.

I would like to start by asking all of you a few questions. Do you have any books or items on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in your library? Do you have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people as your clients? Do you have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff? Do you have clients who are interested in information on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander issues or people?

If you answer yes to any of these questions then you need to know about the ATSILIRN Protocols.

In the early 1990s Alex Byrne, Heather Moorcroft, Alex Barnes and I realised that there was a need for a set of protocols to guide libraries with regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, as libraries had these sorts of books, had Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander staff, had Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander clients, as well as clients looking for information on Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Australians, and that hasn't changed. After we wrote the Protocols we had a lot of positive feedback from those libraries that were using the Protocols.

Originally there were 11 headings that covered a range of topics,

1. Content and perspectives
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectual property issues
3. Accessibility and use
4. Description and classification of
7. Governance and management
8. Staffing
9. Education and training for professional practice
10. Awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples and issues

materials

5. Secret or sacred materials
6. Offensive materials

11. Copying and repatriation of records to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Each of these topics was then broken down into an overview and then relevant points, for example:

## **7. Governance and management**

There is no requirement for Aborigines to be members of the governing boards or councils, no provisions for some form of Aboriginal or advisory committee,... (Henrietta Fourmile, 1989)

Libraries, archives and information services which serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and/or hold materials with Aboriginal and Torres Strait content or perspectives should ensure the involvement and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in governance, management and operation. Such agencies will:

- 7.1 Ensure appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership of governing and advisory bodies including boards, councils and committees.
- 7.2 Ensure meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in effective development, adoption and implementation of relevant policies.
- 7.3 Develop mechanisms to ensure effective monitoring and review of policy implementation.
- 7.4 Facilitate organisational change to accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. (Byrne *et al.* 1995)

These were then followed by a section on implementing the Protocols.

The Protocols were written and intended as guidelines only, to give direction to those who might need and want it. In the preamble of the 1995 published version of the Protocols we wrote, *they are a guide to good practice which will need to be interpreted and applied in the context of each organisation's goals and responsibilities, collections and client community.* (Byrne *et al.* 1995) This has not changed. We the compilers want you as librarians and information providers to use them but in a way that fits in with your organisation.

In 2004 a project was undertaken to determine whether the Protocols are a useful strategy for highlighting Indigenous information issues and promoting responses to them, to identify any emerging issues which may need to be included, and to collect professional comment on how they could be improved. The project was called 'Mapping the impact of the 1995 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services' project. The project was conducted by the University of Technology Sydney Library and Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning. The project surveyed as many organisations as possible – National, State, public, University and school libraries, some specialist libraries, National and State archives and some museums.

From the results of the survey it was evident that the *Protocols* formed a most important contribution to the professional literature and advancement of the interests of Indigenous peoples in Australia and that they should be reinvigorated. They now form part of various libraries' policy statements, such as the State Library of South Australia, which endorses the Protocols, and the Northern Territory Library which 'accords' with the Protocols, as well as the library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which has adopted the Protocols.

One of the results of the mapping project was the addition of a new protocol, 'Digitisation and Internet' and the old hardcopy book being replaced by a website, and being renamed the ATSilIRN Protocols.

Also note that *the Protocols do not promote censorship - materials now considered offensive or inappropriate still form part of the historical record.*

The Protocols should enable you as an information professional to make sound judgements regarding appropriate responses to any issues, or provide you with some ideas about where to go to for assistance if more expertise is required.  
(ATSilIRN Protocols)

## **ATSilIRN**

ATSilIRN is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network. It began in 1993. The Network was established after it was recognised that there was a need for a support and information network for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people working in libraries and for those people servicing the information needs of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ATSilIRN holds an annual conference and at this year's conference, held in April, a number of aspects of the Protocols were workshopped. One area was making the Protocols more relevant to smaller libraries, school libraries and public libraries. We know that Australia has a wide range of information services, archives and libraries, that their scope extends from the small neighbourhood information centre, to the regional centres. Public libraries must serve their communities, whether in a busy city centre or spread out over a large shire. Yet Australia's information agencies have a responsibility to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. There are already a number of these libraries that are doing so, such as the Northern Regional Library & Information Service, based in Moree, NSW, which has an Indigenous Unit, the Goulburn Valley Regional Library Corporation in Victoria, with its Koori Library Pathway Project, also there are the Knowledge Centres here in the Northern Territory, as well as in Queensland.

Another area which created discussion was Digitisation, around which there was a great deal of discussion on access and dissemination. We as libraries and information providers digitise for two main reasons: preservation and access. Are these two reasons compatible? Perhaps, maybe, yes or just not on every occasion. If we had the budget should we digitise everything for preservation reasons? Who should do the digitising of

Indigenous materials? What of secret, sensitive or offensive material? The answers to some of these questions are already covered in the current Protocols.

Then there are questions about access. Access to some material may only be for in-house use, but much may be able to be disseminated via the Web; some examples of this are, Dawn (<http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/dawn/index.htm>) and Protection Board Reports from various States. However, there may be material that does need consultation and the Protocols encourage consultation where relevant. Many times communities are happy to have their material online, as it makes it easier for them to access.

## 2020 Summit

This year at the Prime Minister's 2020 Summit in Canberra, Rachel Perkins, an Arnernte woman who is a film and documentary director, addressed the Creative Stream meeting and said that in order to embrace our culture,

We harness our cultural institutions, the museums, the Galleries, the ABC and SBS, the National Archive ..., the National Library, the State Libraries - these places that hold and nurture our culture, that create culture and express Australian identity.

We appoint an Indigenous person to every single board that steers those institutions, we sow the seeds and by 2020 you will see them bloom - Indigenous cultural output, created and managed by Indigenous people who have the rights and responsibilities; the mandate-of looking after our culture so that across the board the Australian public can share what we have to offer.

Offer Indigenous people a seat at the table, not the crumbs from it. (Perkins 2008)

As a result of the discussion prompted by Rachel's appeal to the Creative Stream, *it was recognised that this needed to be done now and that government could lead the way by appointing Indigenous people to state and federal public cultural and collection institutions*, (Final Report, 2008:262).

So I ask, why should the government lead the way? Why cannot libraries take the lead? As the Protocols have stated for fourteen years, *Ensure appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership of governing and advisory bodies including boards, councils and committees*. (Byrne *et al.* 1995) As the National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library services and collections also states: *The library and information sector is encouraged to incorporate into its plans: The involvement of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders on library boards, steering/advisory/reference committees, and/or special interest groups*.

One library that is leading the way in this area, is the State Library of Queensland, having had Jackie Huggins and Lilla Watson on their board for a number of years and now Max Lenoy, who are Indigenous leaders in Queensland, but we need more in all the states. I agree with Rachel and I hope that the other Libraries will follow the lead of the State Library of Queensland.

## Native American Protocols

In April, 2006, a group of Americans started work on the *Native American Protocols for libraries, archives and information services*, at the Northern Arizona University (NAU), in Flagstaff. The group was composed of indigenous and non-indigenous, librarians, archivists and tribal archivists. This work evolved into the *Native American Protocols for Archives*. Even though their Protocols focus on archives and not libraries they still acknowledge the ATSilIRN Protocols.

And that is what I would like to see happen. The ATSilIRN Protocols have been written for use by you, as librarians, for those archivists who would like to use them for anyone, for anyone who would like to use them. The work has been done and will continue to be done when necessary, to save you time and money so that you do not have to start from scratch to develop your own. Use the ATSilIRN Protocols, build on them but do acknowledge them, even as Native Americans have in their set of protocols.

## Conclusion

The Library Council of New South Wales, Public Library Policy, 2008-2011, Discussion Draft, supports *observance of the ATSilIRN Protocols*, (Northern Territory Library 2005), The State Library of South Australia endorses the Protocols, AIATSIS Library has adopted the Protocols, LISWA recognises the findings and recommendations of a number of significant documents, including the Protocols, the Northern Territory Library in its Collection Development and Access policy, accords with the Protocols. So whether your library supports, observes, endorses, adopts, recognises or accords with the Protocols state it in your policy documents.

The Protocols are there for you to use whether you use all of them or one or two of them. I encourage you to use them.

## References

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## Biography

Alana Garwood-Houng is a Yorta Yorta woman with Wergaia and Wamba Wamba heritage. She has worked as a librarian with the Library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies since 1989. She is one of the founding members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network and its President from 1994-1998, and again from 2005-2007. She was the Coordinator of ALIA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recruitment and Career Development Strategy for the Library and Information Sector in 1996. In 1999 she was appointed to the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board for three years. She is also one of the co-authors of *the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and information services*.

Alana is also a practising artist having completed a Diploma of Fine Art in 1985 at what is now Ballarat University. Alana has participated in many exhibitions in Canberra and Victoria. Her work is held in a number of collections including the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Victoria, AIATSIS, Canberra, and the Australian National Museum, Canberra. In 1994 Alana was the winner of the Australian Heritage Commission Art Award Exhibition, photography section.