

Suggestions for Consultation with the Representative Aboriginal Organisations (RAOs) on Heritage Projects in the ACT

**Canberra Archaeological Society
and Aboriginal Archaeologists Australia**

for the National Trust of Australia (ACT)

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Getting started

The ACT Heritage Unit will supply a list of the current contact people for the RAOs to be consulted on heritage projects in the ACT.

Contact can be made by letter but phone calls are recommended as well. It may take several calls to catch the right people to talk to, but be patient. These are busy people undertaking a large amount of quite complex community work in their spare time. Your polite perseverance will demonstrate the sincerity of your approach.

Who is best to undertake consultation?

A person who is known to the RAOs and with whom they are comfortable is the best person to discuss projects with them. It can take years to develop a relationship of trust; remember that Indigenous people carry memories of past ignoring by people from government and the private sector so are naturally wary of new contacts and proposals. People with a short term interest or need to consult come and go in the lives of Aboriginal representatives.

If you are new to consulting, you might consider taking with you someone who is better known to the RAOs, at least for your first visit. Make sure you are clear about who this is and what their role is.

The ACT Heritage Unit may have a Liaison Officer who can help or may be able to suggest an experienced worker or consultant. If you do approach a consultant, you will need to negotiate their fees for time and expenses before commencing the project.

Everyone has to start somewhere, so if you are on your own in your first consultation, show your normal politeness, respect and courtesy.

Be aware that you have to earn your reputation personally with the RAOs. It does not matter how respected you are in your field of endeavour; you need to develop your own connections and earn your stripes. Large egos are not helpful.

Indigenous people share knowledge of who they respect and are comfortable working with, so once you pass muster, your reputation will increase as more people have the chance to work with you. Your ability to maintain this reputation will be based on your ethical, respectful and ongoing liaisons.

Remuneration

Please ask if any fees will be charged for this consultation and how much these will be so there is no embarrassment at the end of the process.

Take time

RAOs should be accorded the respect of early consultation so that they can have an impact on and input to the course of the project.

Please give as much notice as you can to the RAOs that you need to consult with them. Offer them the opportunity to meet and have the project clarified. If you try to rush the process into a tight timeframe you may be disappointed.

RAOs like to understand fully what your project is about so be prepared to discuss all aspects; a face to face meeting is best. RAOs may like to see outlines, draft plans and images, so bring drafts to the meeting to hand out, but be very sure that these are not presented as final versions or set in concrete in any way. It is usually best to talk about the project before presenting detailed printed information.

Make sure you listen carefully as well as explaining your project.

RAOs may have a number of issues with the government, educational institutions and other RAOs. They usually like to get these aired early in the discussion. Listen with respect, acknowledge what you can, take on notice what you can and explain what you can't change. Once this business is over you will generally be able to discuss your project.

Ways of consulting

Be honest and don't play politics.

Accept 'no' as 'no' and be prepared to walk away from the project if there is no solution at the time. Don't argue with the RAO representatives if there is a negative response to your consultation request. People have long memories and you will not be allowed back to meet for some time, if at all. An argumentative approach will most probably also jeopardise the project.

There may be some ups and downs and even some sticking points in your consultation, but be honest and persevere. A number of consultation meetings may need to be planned for each of the RAO groups so that people have time to think and understand a concept and prepare their response.

Outcomes

The *ACT Heritage Act 2004*, section 31, requires consultation with representative Aboriginal organisations before deciding whether to provisionally register an Aboriginal place or object. 'The council must consult, and consider the views of, each representative Aboriginal organisation about the provisional registration'.

The ACT Heritage Council requires consultation with RAOs for all heritage projects funded through ACT Heritage Grants involving Aboriginal sites. It is not clear what the outcomes are required to be, but some kind of agreement would seem appropriate.

If some of the RAOs do not agree with the project, their concerns should be brought back to the client or supervisors and alternatives canvassed. You will then need to go back to the RAOs to see if these changes are acceptable.

If your client or the authority has major constraints that limit your ability to assist the RAOs to agreement, you should try to make a meeting between the RAOs and the power brokers. You or an appropriately experienced person should facilitate this meeting.

Consultation record

It is best to record your consultation, no matter what the outcomes. Below is our suggestion for headings and format:

Project: *(name of project and any description needed)*

Date of consultation: *(leave a few lines to explain several contact dates if necessary)*

Representative Aboriginal Organisation:

Contact person/people consulted:

Consultation by: *(your name)*

Recommendations/comments:

Signature of RAO representative:

Your signature:

Date:

Good luck!

May your experiences enrich your life and the lives of those you touch.