



Australian Government

Fact sheet



Preserving culture – a world first

In 1999, a group of Aboriginal traditional owners of Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park sat down in the sand and began drawing pictures of how they might preserve their cultural information.

Six years later, they've come up with a state of the art digital system which observes all cultural protocols, overcomes language differences and is in demand from the Kimberly to Port Augusta, and from Vanuatu to the USA.

Initially the traditional owners, Anangu, worked with park staff to document and conserve 80 rock art sites which were threatened by visitors, wasp nests, water damage, dust and animals.

But the project rapidly expanded into a multimedia interactive database to record a rich heritage handed down not in written form, but in Anangu songs, dances, stories and relationships. Western technology has met Anangu cultural needs in the best traditions of joint management.

This multimedia system is computer based, with a Microsoft Internet Explorer interface. It is a simple intuitive system, with extensive use of icons and graphics to overcome language or reading difficulties.

The database has solved a crucial cultural problem: how to make sure that only the right people view the secret/sacred material and that men's and women's information is kept separate. The database has three levels: the public sites, the men's sites and the women's sites. Within each site, password protection means that only the right people see the sensitive information. For Anangu, it provides appropriate cultural preservation of social and cultural landscapes and a safe keeping place for their unwritten heritage.

The database contains information in many forms: there are digital audio sound tracks and video clips, site plans, photographs, report forms and work forms.

So far 100 hours of oral histories have been captured. They preserve for all time stories about Tjukurpa (Anangu law), traditional land management practices and memories of first white contact, growing up and working with the park.

The earliest forms date back to the 1920s and the earliest photographs to the 1930s.

Anangu Ranger Mick Starkey led the project in collaboration with senior Anangu from the Mutitjulu Community, other Anangu Rangers and Park staff and a heritage consultant.

The first phase of the multimedia database is in use in the Cultural Heritage Unit. The first users have been trained in the skills to use the system effectively.

The database is a giant step forward in preserving the World Heritage values of Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park. There is worldwide interest from communities wishing to preserve their own heritage in culturally appropriate ways.