

Commitment to truth-telling

December 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

As a peak heritage body, we acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country that we call Victoria as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, and acknowledge the importance and significance of Aboriginal cultural heritage across the state.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of Aboriginal culture and traditional practices.

Language note

The following language is respectfully used in this document:

- **First Peoples** – when referring to all people of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent living in Victoria
- **Traditional Owner** – has the same meaning as in section 7 of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, and is used in this document when specifically referring to Traditional Owners of the Country that is part of the State of Victoria.

Expertise and resources relied upon

This document has been developed using a wide range of resources and would not have been possible without the ongoing work of First Peoples. The Heritage Council has greatly benefited from the time, resources and emotional labor that First Peoples have contributed to the wide array of resources that have shaped this document.

In particular, we wish to acknowledge the work of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the Yoorrook Justice Commission, the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council and Reconciliation Australia for the in-depth, truthful, challenging, ground-breaking and inspiring work they have undertaken to date.

The commitments in this document are informed by the aspirations and words of First Peoples in Victoria.

A list of all resources consulted in preparing this document is provided on page 8. Links to various legislation and resources are provided throughout the document when relevant.

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Cover Photograph: View of Robin Boyd–designed visitor centre, Tower Hill State Game Reserve (VHR H2114) on the Country of the Eastern Maar Peoples (*Hin Lim Photography* © 2025)

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Purpose

To guide and inform meaningful action within our role and functions under the *Heritage Act 2017*, so that the Heritage Council of Victoria is a culturally safe organisation that meets the expectations of First Peoples in Victoria in relation to truth-telling, recognition and respect.

Approach

We respect First Peoples and Aboriginal cultural heritage, understanding that the places and objects we protect in Victoria can include layered, often complex, histories with significance to First Peoples and non-Aboriginal people. We take meaningful action in our work to listen to First Peoples, and to support them to tell their histories and truths in the spirit of reconciliation and healing in Victoria. We understand that truth-telling is fundamental for a future of reconciliation and healing and we incorporate the principles of truth-telling into our work.

Accountability

All Heritage Council members are responsible for upholding and delivering the commitments in this document. The commitments will inform the priorities we identify and work towards each year in our corporate plan. We will show the changes we're making and our progress to support truth-telling in our annual report to the Victorian Parliament. We acknowledge that this work, and our learning, is ongoing and evolving.

Aboriginal cultural heritage

The land, sea and waterways today known as Victoria have always been, and continue to be, lived with and cared for by First Peoples. The [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) (p.33) reports that the area now known as Victoria was the most densely populated region of the continent prior to British colonisation. Traditional Owners across Victoria are the custodians of this history and have maintained their cultural heritage for tens of thousands of years.

In Victoria, Aboriginal cultural heritage is protected through the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* (Aboriginal Heritage Act). Its main purpose is to provide for the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage and Aboriginal intangible heritage in Victoria. Aboriginal cultural heritage exists throughout the state, in the natural environment, coastal landscapes and urban environments. Intangible heritage is passed between generations; while it is often associated with a place or object, this is not always the case. Intangible heritage includes stories, oral traditions, rituals, festivals, craft and artistic traditions, as well as environmental and ecological knowledge. The Heritage Council supports the Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand's vision as set out in *Dhawura Ngilan*, that First Peoples should independently manage their cultural and intangible heritage.

Implementation of the Aboriginal Heritage Act is undertaken primarily by the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, Registered Aboriginal Parties, and First Peoples – State Relations.

Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council

The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council (VAHC) is an independent statutory authority established under the Aboriginal Heritage Act. Its members are Traditional Owners. The VAHC's responsibilities include, among others, promoting understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage and being the central coordinating body for overseeing, monitoring, managing, reporting and returning of Aboriginal Ancestral Remains and secret or sacred objects.

Registered Aboriginal Parties

Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) are representative corporations, inclusive of all Traditional Owners of an identified Country. RAPs have statutory functions under the Aboriginal Heritage Act as the primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of Aboriginal cultural heritage. RAPs are responsible for providing advice and knowledge to the Victorian Government and the VAHC, considering and advising on applications for cultural heritage permits, and evaluating, approving or refusing cultural heritage management plans, among other statutory functions. The VAHC is responsible for the appointment of RAPs in Victoria.

First Peoples – State Relations

First Peoples – State Relations is the state government regulator of the Aboriginal Heritage Act, operating within the Victorian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet. The remit of First Peoples – State Relations includes maintaining the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, enforcing the Aboriginal Heritage Act and promoting understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register holds information about known Aboriginal cultural heritage places and objects within Victoria. Access to it is restricted, as it contains culturally sensitive information. While the Aboriginal Heritage Register is extensive, it is not the only way Aboriginal cultural heritage is recognised and protected, and it is not a complete record of what is significant to First Peoples.

Truth-telling

Truth-telling is a term that describes various actions or processes that expose truths about the historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples as a result of colonisation. These truths have historically been silenced, or altered, to reflect only the perspective of colonisers. Truth-telling is about ensuring First Peoples' voices and perspectives are listened to, accepted, acted upon and, as described by the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) (p.140), 'given equal place in the historical record'.

[The First Peoples Assembly of Victoria](#) describes why truth-telling is important:

Truth-telling will:

- *Recognise the injustices that have been largely ignored and actively hidden from the Australian consciousness and will change how the history of Australia is viewed.*
- *Empower individuals to openly share their own stories and have their truth acknowledged.*
- *Expose what has happened as a result of colonisation, what the causes were, who is responsible, the harm that was caused, and how these structures continue to impact First Peoples.*

Truth-telling can be undertaken at the organisational level. While it should be led by First Peoples, there are ways that non-Aboriginal people can support the process. [Reconciliation Australia](#) describes three principles for non-Aboriginal people to follow when engaging in the truth-telling process:

- 01. 'Research** Australian history' and connect with First Peoples
- 02. 'Truth-listening'** – 'be a safe audience' and 'listen deeply'
- 03. 'Truth-acting'** – 'take action for change' and 'amplify the truth'.

The commitments in this document will guide the Heritage Council to engage in the principles of truth-telling in various ways throughout its work.

Heritage Council's statutory remit in relation to Aboriginal cultural heritage

The Heritage Council of Victoria is an independent statutory authority established under the *Heritage Act 2017* (Heritage Act). It is the primary decision-making body responsible for determining places and objects of cultural heritage significance to the State of Victoria. These places and objects are included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). The Heritage Council also has broad functions relating to the provision of advice, education, and promotion of the state's cultural heritage.

While the Heritage Act (section 8) 'does not apply to a place or object that is of cultural heritage significance only on the grounds of its association with Aboriginal tradition' the VHR can and does include places and objects that have heritage values and complex layered histories of significance to both First Peoples and non-Aboriginal people. There are many such examples across Victoria.

The Heritage Council does not have a statutory role in preparing histories or the Statements of Significance for places and objects to be included in the VHR. However, it works closely with the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria to ensure that the layered histories of these places and objects are considered in its decision making and captured in records where possible.

The Heritage Council has a responsibility to acknowledge in its work the historical and ongoing consequences of colonisation on First Peoples, and the resilience and endurance of First Peoples' culture and community.

Our commitments

The Heritage Council's work inevitably includes places and objects that represent dispossession and trauma experienced by First Peoples as a result of colonisation. We will ensure that across all our business areas and functions we will facilitate a culturally safe environment that recognises and respects Aboriginal cultural heritage and First Peoples across Victoria. The following commitments describe how we will do this.

Incorporating the principles of truth-telling in our work

We respect that truth-telling should be led by First Peoples and commit to incorporate the principles of truth-telling into our work. We understand that truth-telling is fundamental to creating culturally safe environments and addressing unconscious bias.

Within our work, we will participate in and support truth-telling by:

- giving genuine consideration as to whether place and object records include a portrayal of the history of Victoria that embraces truth-telling, when assessing places and objects for inclusion in the VHR
- utilising resources developed by and including the perspectives of First Peoples that will enhance our learning about Victoria's layered histories, and sharing such resources between members and with our stakeholders and the public, where and when appropriate
- where appropriate, supporting the inclusion of Traditional Owner place names in VHR records and recognising the Traditional Owners and Country of the places and objects recorded in the VHR entries on the VHD
- using our communication platform and programs to find appropriate ways to create space for First Peoples to tell their stories and truths, and to amplify First People's resources, publications and stories where appropriate
- advocating for respect for Aboriginal cultural heritage and the people and organisations responsible for its protection.

Recognising and challenging unconscious bias

Unconscious bias refers to attitudes and patterns of perceptions that are held subconsciously. These automatic assumptions can influence thoughts and actions that can result in unfair advantages or disadvantages without the decision-maker's awareness.

We are aware that unconscious biases may exist and we commit to take action to understand where biases may impact our work and members. We take steps to remedy any such biases.

Unconscious bias may arise when we:

- consider the Executive Director's Recommendations and make decisions to include places and objects in the VHR
- conduct our hearings and meetings
- use language and terminology that is outdated, incorrect, hurtful or from one perspective only
- assume certain work can only be completed by Heritage Council members who are Aboriginal
- place undue burden and cultural load on Heritage Council members who are Aboriginal.

We acknowledge that unconscious bias can lead to discrimination and commit to take steps to ensure that we are an organisation free from discrimination. We will do this by:

- ensuring individual members take responsibility for their own learning
- being an organisation that is open to changing the way we work, and unlearning biases
- building confidence and capacity among non-Aboriginal members to engage in difficult conversations and asking questions that may not be answerable without further work or perspectives
- ensuring that specific guidance material exists and is maintained to enable members to carry out their functions in a way that is free from unconscious bias

- listening to and accepting the voices and perspectives of Heritage Council members who are Aboriginal to understand where unconscious bias exists within the organisation.

Ensuring a culturally safe environment

Culturally safe practices and attitudes are those that demonstrate an understanding, acceptance and respect for the cultural identities of First Peoples. Culturally safe environments ensure there is no challenge or denial of First Peoples' identity, experience and ongoing connection to culture, community and Country.

We commit to a continual and conscious recognition of First Peoples' cultural identity. We will create an environment free of prejudice, so that cultural expression can be freely practiced. We will:

- coordinate cultural safety training for incoming and existing members
- recognise the spaces we have accountability for (e.g. hearing spaces, meeting spaces, events, communication platforms) and take action to make these spaces culturally safe
- identify instances across our spaces and processes that may prevent or discourage participation of First Peoples in our processes, or result in a culturally unsafe environment (e.g. language use, assumed participation from Heritage Council members who are Aboriginal)
- support Heritage Council members who are Aboriginal to take action if their working environment is culturally unsafe, and ensure non-Aboriginal members accept and take responsibility to change culturally unsafe behaviours
- be willing to change our behaviour to foster cultural safety.

Resources consulted

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