

Dr Mickey Dewar Oration

Darwin, 31 May 2022

Pat Turner

THE TELLING OF ABORIGINAL STORIES

Thank you, Charlie, for that warm introduction.

Welcome everyone.

My name is Pat Turner, and I am honoured to deliver this year's Mickey Dewar Oration.

I am the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

I also have the privilege of being elected the first lead convener of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations.

Foremost, I am Aboriginal.

I am the daughter of an Arrente man and a Gurdanji woman and I grew up in Alice Springs.

Being Aboriginal and of the First Peoples of this country is my story, the story of who I am.

I extend my warmest regards to Mickey's husband, Dr David Ritchie, and her family. I acknowledge the stories of Mickey's family life.

Welcome also to Mr Simon Froude and Mrs Phyllis Williams and others with us from the National Archives. I acknowledge the national stories that you gather and protect as part of your work.

Mickey Dewar was a storyteller. She understood that the stories of our nation needed to be told so that, as a country, we could understand where we have come from and who we are.

Mickey knew that for us to move forward as a more reconciled and modern nation, the stories of our past needed to be told.

Mickey's work led to the stories of many Aboriginal people being told and some of our history being recognised.

This evening I want to talk to you about the importance of Aboriginal storytelling, and how it shapes the nation and our own cultures and identities.

Aboriginal peoples are the original storytellers.

Telling stories is both a cultural practice of who we are as peoples and is a way in which we sustain our identities and lands.

To begin tonight's story, I pay my respects to the Larrakia Elders past and present.

We are gathering on the country of the Larrakia people, and I thank them for their continuing openness to have so many of us live, work and meet on their land.

Larrakia country runs from Cox peninsula in the west to Gunn Point in the north, Adelaide River in the east and down to the Manton Dam area southwards.

The Larrakia people established the first trade routes in the region, trading with the Tiwi, Wagait, and Wulna people as well as with Indonesian fishermen.

Their stories, songs, and ceremonies echo the strong connection and understanding they have with the saltwater country.

Telling stories of country

Acknowledgement of Country, now a welcoming convention in Australia, is born of an ancient cultural ritual of our peoples relating to the regulation of visitors on country.

This cultural process has always been an important element of Aboriginal societies across different First Nations, language groups and clans for thousands of years.

It is a practice born of recognition, relatedness and reciprocity between our nation groups.

If you were crossing into someone else's country, it was a requirement to send a request to the owners to be granted permission to enter and be offered safe practice and protection.

In turn, the visitor agreed to acknowledge, adhere to, and respect the rules of the country that was being entered.

Vital information could also be shared between nations, about how and where to access food and water and protect the country you were travelling on.

Whilst the way in which this protocol is expressed between our peoples has changed since colonisation, the sentiment and practice has never disappeared.

For Aboriginal peoples, the practice continues to inform how we introduce ourselves to each other and how we relate to each other.

Importantly, the practice is a way of knowing ourselves.

For Aboriginal peoples, country, is fundamentally about identity. It embodies our spirituality, language, family, ancestral connection, and lore.

Continuing to tell the story of our place, of our country, maintains the story of our connection to who we are as Aboriginal peoples and where we come from.

The Acknowledgment of Country, as part of mainstream Australian practice, has additional, important story telling benefits.

The first is the story of acknowledgement and respect and learning that is required from the settlers.

To undertake an Acknowledgement of Country, Australians need to research and learn who are the original owners and inhabitants of the land they are on.

Whether they like it or not, in performing an Acknowledgment of Country, Australians are learning part of the stories of the past and are speaking to our ongoing connection to country into the present.

By bringing our story into the present, the second benefit that an Acknowledgment of Country speaks to is the brutal dispossession of our peoples, including of my own peoples for which reparations are yet to be made.

It is a political act that, because of the lack of equity and justice for its First Nations peoples, talks to an unreconciled nation.

It is not surprising that some have traced and linked the modern resurgence of the Acknowledgement of Country to the land rights era of the 1980s.

It doesn't matter what lines have been drawn over the country by the settlers, the markings of States and Territories and the calling of our rivers and mountains by different names.

An Acknowledgement of Country tells the story that underneath the Whitefella map of this nation, there is an old map that still speaks and is yet to be properly recognised or accounted for.

Without the stories of Aboriginal peoples, and without the contribution of historians and storytellers like Mickey, there would be no land rights for our peoples.

When the British arrived, they sought to erase our stories, through their own story of Terra Nullius – land belonging to no-one.

British colonisation and subsequent Australian land laws were established on the claim that Australia was terra nullius, effectively denying First Nations peoples' land rights.

The British story that we were 'uncivilised'; had no political or social organisation; and no settled communities and ownership of land, justified acquisition of our countries without treaty or payment.

Over time, and through the continual telling of our stories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have reclaimed some of our country back.

The stories have confirmed that in fact we had and have organised societies and political structures; that we owned and own and cared and care for our lands; and continue to maintain a spiritual connection to our Country.

Laws like the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory and the Native Title Act have provided the platform for our stories to be told and heard, often for the first time.

Whilst some of our stories have been heard, there is still a way to go.

As we look forward, Australia continues to grapple with the story of Terra Nullius and the subsequent lack of Treaty.

Australia is the only English settler state without a legally binding treaty with its First Peoples.

A Treaty would radically reshape the relationship between First Nations peoples and other Australians, beginning with an acknowledgement of a simple story—that sovereignty of this land was never ceded.

A Treaty would provide an opportunity for First Nations people and the Australian state speak to one another and tell their stories, for the first time, as sovereign to sovereign.

A Treaty is about settling the account of the past, ensuring the telling of the Aboriginal perspective, and developing a shared story for the future.

As momentum in Australia builds towards Treaties – including for a national Treaty as part of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and here in the Northern Territory – the importance of our Aboriginal story telling is paramount.

The story tellers here tonight, and those that help to protect and preserve our stories, all have a role to play.

It is the Aboriginal stories of our livelihoods, cultures and connections to land that will be the foundation of treaties.

And it is the stories of our past that will bring about a more reconciled future where Australia can both acknowledge the periods of colonial conflict and dispossession as well as the strength and resilience of First Nations peoples and cultures.

Story telling is who we are

For Aboriginal peoples, storytelling is part of who we are, and it is also what sustains us as First Nations peoples with unique and distinct identities and cultures.

Our storytelling is a way to instil a knowledge of the mind, body, and soul in connection to the earth.

There are stories that teach values, family histories, significant events, relationships, and cultural beliefs. And there are sacred stories that tell about the world and its creation.

The life lessons and perspectives brought about in Aboriginal storytelling are essential for our peoples to make sense of the world and to shape and sustain our cultural identity.

Over time, whilst the purpose of storytelling remains the same, the way in which Aboriginal peoples tell stories has changed.

From the beginning, our stories would be guided by the earth and the sky. The sky and the stars inform our creation stories and also tell us about the changing seasons, weather patterns and availability of food and water sources.

These stories were shared as part of daily conversation around campfires, through paintings and other artefacts and through dedicated ceremonies.

As innate storytellers, Aboriginal peoples have used the opportunities of new story telling platforms as they have been developed.

As media started to impact significantly on our peoples, we knew that we needed to get some control over how we were portrayed and to speak to our own peoples.

We also knew there was an opportunity to help preserve our languages and cultures through the broader telling of our stories in our own languages and ways.

In 2007, NITV started beaming out across the bush. From an office in Alice Springs, a long-fought for milestone in modern Aboriginal story telling was reached: a national Indigenous television service.

NITV is about Aboriginal peoples telling Aboriginal stories, in control of how their images are portrayed and sharing our cultures, languages and histories with each other.

I was privileged to be the first CEO of NITV, bringing together more than 25 years of campaigning by Aboriginal peoples in that first broadcast.

Before television, Aboriginal peoples drew on radio to share our stories.

In 1972, the first Aboriginal produced community radio program went to air in Adelaide.

Around the same time in Alice Springs, the movement that saw the establishment of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) begun.

Aboriginal radio, right across the country, has now become a vital forum to give voice to our stories.

Using radio and television to tell our stories gives Aboriginal peoples a strong voice in the development of country, culture, politics and education.

It also helps to arrest cultural disintegration, reconnect Aboriginal peoples that have lost parts of their identity and empower people and bring inspiration to our lives.

A growing group of young Aboriginal peoples are now taking to Tik Tok to tell their stories and the stories of Aboriginal peoples.

Through Tik Tok, Aboriginal young peoples are celebrating and reconnecting and with their identities and languages. They are also using the platform to advocate for social justice, for our stories to be heard on a national scale.

It might surprise you, but I am too old for Tik Tok.

The stories I grew up with were told under big gum trees, out on porches, sometimes laying in swags and looking up to the stars.

From my mother and father, I learnt the story of my family and about their country.

And from my extended family, I heard the stories of the fight for the civil rights of Aboriginal people.

Both these stories helped to shape who I am today. They gave me my sense of what it means to be an Aboriginal person and instilled a fire in me to imagine and work towards a better future for our peoples.

Protecting our stories

It is vital that Aboriginal stories are projected and protected – for the survival of our peoples as First Nations peoples with distinct cultures and identities.

As Aboriginal peoples embrace new ways of telling their stories and with a nation starting to show more openness to hear our stories, we need to better consider the question of intellectual property rights.

Our peoples' intellectual property rights extend to include a wide range of subject matter, beyond what is recognised within existing intellectual property rights and other protection systems in Australia.

Our intellectual property is closely linked to land, cultural heritage and environment, and also to cultural property – all expressed through our stories.

Aboriginal knowledge, creative expressions, innovations and stories are also owned and transmitted communally and are tightly integrated into all other aspects of society.

These features are at odds with conventional western notions of intellectual property and are not being protected by Australian copyright laws.

Meanwhile, a growing body of declarations, statements, and other developments both within the United Nations and its agencies, and by Indigenous peoples around the world, calls attention to the unique features of First Nations' intellectual property systems and provides potential opportunities for countries to introduce measures to recognise and protect these.

This must be a priority for the incoming Australian Government.

Moving forward

All of us here today can contribute to the protection and preservation of our stories, making sure that Aboriginal stories are heard as we want them told and that they remain our stories to tell.

The National Archives has and continues to play a vital role in the protection and preservation of our stories, whilst respecting our intellectual property.

The stories held by the National Archives have been valuable in native title claims, language revival, and history writing and essential in reconnecting current generations to those who have passed.

Mickey Dewar, who we are honouring tonight, knew the importance of stories and of Aboriginal stories.

She knew that the telling of the stories of our past would help create a more reconciled, honest future. Something Aboriginal peoples are searching for.

Thank you Mickey, and thank you to her family for giving me the honour of telling a story to you tonight.