

Membership Toolkit



Indigenous Languages in Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the oldest continuing cultures in the world. Language is the core of these knowledge systems, connecting people to Country, kinship, culture, and identity.

For First Nations communities, speaking an Indigenous language strengthens cultural identity and deepens connections to family, community, and Country. It is also associated with better social and emotional wellbeing, as well as improved education and employment outcomes.[i] Supporting Indigenous languages is therefore important for cultural preservation, health, and equity in our society.

Languages Today

- Before European colonisation, over 250 languages and 800 dialects were spoken across Australia. [ii]
- Government policies of forced assimilation and child removal suppressed the speaking of these languages, and placed them under severe threat.
- Today, only 123 languages are still spoken, and just 14 are considered strong (children still learn them as a first language). The remaining 109 are considered endangered and all are under threat. [iii]
- Australia has one of the highest rates of language loss in the world.

What You Can Do

- **Learn whose Country you are on.** Use resources from AIATSIS, First Languages Australia and local Aboriginal organisations to find the language(s) of the place where you live, work, or study.
- **Respect community protocols.** Only communities and recognised knowledge holders can decide how their languages are taught, shared, and documented.
- **Support language projects.** Back Indigenous-led language programs, campaigns, and policies that put communities in control of decision-making.



[i] Luis Perez, "ANU study finds strong link between place, language and wellbeing for First Nations communities", ANU, March, 2025
<https://research.anu.edu.au/research-innovation-news/anu-study-finds-strong-link-between-place-language-and-wellbeing-for-first>

[ii] AIATSIS, "Indigenous Australian languages", March, 2022,

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/third-national-indigenous-languages-survey-online/introduction>.

[iii] Ibid.

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In NSW

NSW is home to around 35 Aboriginal languages and more than 100 dialects.[iv] To help grow and sustain these languages, the NSW Government has committed to a new syllabus that introduces Aboriginal languages from Kindergarten to Year 10. From 2024, NSW schools are implementing the new Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus (2022). Key features include: [v]

- Two pathways: Language Revival and First Language, so students can learn or continue learning a community language within the NSW curriculum.
- A requirement that schools partner with local Aboriginal communities and language knowledge holders when planning and delivering language programs.



NSW Legislation

On October 24, 2017, the NSW Aboriginal Languages Act 2017 came into force. The first law of its kind in Australia to formally recognise the importance of Aboriginal languages. Established under the act, the Aboriginal Languages Trust works alongside First Nations communities to support language custodians, preserve cultural heritage, and promote self-determination in language revitalisation.



[iv] Aboriginal Languages Trust, "NSW Aboriginal Languages Information", 2026,
<https://research.anu.edu.au/research-innovation-news/anu-study-finds-strong-link-between-place-language-and-wellbeing-for-first>.
 [v] NSW Government, "New Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus", October, 2022,
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/nesa/news/all/new-aboriginal-languages-k-10-syllabus>.

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National and Global Action

Closing the Gap

- Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Target 16 commits all Australian governments to a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken by 2031.
- The target recognises that language and culture are central to the health, wellbeing, and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



CLOSING THE GAP

International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

- The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) is a United Nations initiative, aiming to protect, revitalise, and promote Indigenous languages worldwide.
- *Voices of Country*- Australia's National Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Language- serves as a framework to protect, preserve, and celebrate First Nations languages.



2022-2032 | INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF
Indigenous Languages

International Mother Language Day

- Observed on 21 February each year, established by the United Nations and UNESCO, this day promotes the importance of languages to culture, identity, and knowledge.
- In the Australian context, International Mother Language Day provides a yearly platform to raise awareness of the fragility of First Nations languages and to reaffirm commitments under both *Voices of Country* and the Closing the Gap framework.



INTERNATIONAL
MOTHER
LANGUAGE
DAY

21 FEBRUARY