

New website provides vital access to reclaimed Indigenous languages

24/11/2014

The State Library of NSW will provide unprecedented access to vital records of 100 Indigenous Australian languages – many considered to be critically endangered – with the launch **TODAY [Monday 24 November]** of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website, supported by Rio Tinto Australia.

According to NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive Alex Byrne: “Three years ago, with strong support from Rio Tinto Australia, we embarked on a landmark project to revitalise, rescue and preserve Indigenous languages from the State Library’s archival records.

“Our prime purpose was to find and return this deeply critical information to the communities to whom it belongs, and in the most culturally appropriate ways,” said Dr Byrne.

Internationally renowned linguist Dr Michael Walsh took on the mammoth task of sifting through the Library’s 14kms of letters and journals authored by colonial surveyors, officers and missionaries. He discovered valuable details on 100 Indigenous Australian languages – including word lists and vocabularies – that were thought to be lost.

Over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken prior to Australian settlement in 1788, but now only 20 are spoken comprehensively.

The website <indigenous.sl.nsw.gov.au> will provide communities with access to digitised copies of these rediscovered word lists and vocabularies.

“Many people will experience their languages for the very first time through our new website so we’re working closely with communities to consult on the most appropriate ways to provide access to the records,” says Kirsten Thorpe, manager of the State Library’s Indigenous Services Branch.

For example, some areas of the website will have security properties, such as permissions or passwords, for community-only access.

“We are also talking to communities about how they can work with the Library’s Indigenous team in transcribing the word lists,” said Ms Thorpe.

“I am proud to be part of such a powerful language revival initiative that not only gives communities sustainable access to information from their traditional heritage, but is also actively working with communities in the evolution of the website by contributing content, sharing stories and ultimately encouraging multi-generational dialogue.”

Rio Tinto Australia managing director Phil Edmands said “Rio Tinto is pleased to have partnered with the State Library of NSW to help bring to life the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website to ensure the languages of the first Australians continue to be preserved and spoken. This will be a wonderful legacy, not just to our important Indigenous communities, but also for our nation.

Supported by

RioTinto

Media Release

“The website will be a vitally important resource and will help educate all Australians about the culturally significant Indigenous languages in our community and ensure they are preserved forever,” Mr Edmands said.

The website is primarily built for Indigenous communities, but is also a valuable resource for scholars, teachers and students and those interested in language reclamation work. An online education kit with links to the national primary school curriculum will be launched later this year.

Users can search the website by location, language, community or by browsing the Library’s collection items.

“There are currently over 300 collection items on the website where the Indigenous language is not known, so communities can get involved in reviving language right now,” says Ms Thorpe.

The website features artwork by Lucy Simpson, a Yuwaalaraay woman from Northwest NSW.

For more information about the work of the State Library’s Indigenous Services Branch, please contact (02) 9273 1577.

For more information, interviews and images, please contact:

Vanessa Bond, Media & Communications Manager, State Library of NSW
(02) 9273 1566, 0411 259 898, vanessa.bond@sl.nsw.gov.au

Image: Gurayn (detail), Lucy Simpson, Yuwaalaraay woman (northwest NSW), founder of design company Gaawaa Miyay

Supported by

RioTinto