

First Nations Engagement in Exhibition Touring

Principles, guidance, and a minimum standard checklist

This guidance is for tour organisers and host venues alike. It is designed to be a starting point and complimentary to existing frameworks and strategies. First Nations peoples, cultures, and communities are not a monolith, meaning good practice in one place may look different in another. We encourage you to build on what is here in conversation with the First Nations peoples connected to your work, your place, and your project.

This guidance does not replace your organisation's Reconciliation Action Plan, First Nations engagement strategy, or the advice of First Nations people you work with.

Context

Exhibition touring in Australia is inseparable from First Nations Country. Every tour travels across lands with living cultural, spiritual, and governance relationships that have endured for tens of thousands of years. Many exhibitions carry First Nations stories, objects, images, and knowledge and even those that do not are still arriving on Country.

Recognising this is the foundation of doing this work well.

First Nations peoples have the right to self-determination including the right to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage and knowledge. This principle is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which Australia endorsed in 2009. It is also reflected in Creative Australia's Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts (the ICIP Protocols), which provide the primary practical framework for the arts sector.

What this means in practice is that First Nations engagement is not something you do to a project at the end. It is something you build into how a project is conceived, planned, delivered, and reflected upon in genuine relationship with the people whose knowledge, stories, and Country are involved.

This is also about the long-term health of the touring sector. Trust, credibility, and cultural legitimacy are built over time through consistent, respectful practice. The minimum standards in this guidance are a floor and we hope you will go further.

Five principles for First Nations engagement

These principles should shape every aspect of a touring project — from planning through to evaluation. They are grounded in UNDRIP and the Creative Australia ICIP Protocols, adapted for the exhibition touring context.

1. Respect Country and cultural authority

Every exhibition travels across Country, the ancestral lands, waterways, skies, and living knowledge systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Country an exhibition visits, and the Country of the people whose work or stories it carries, should be understood and respected throughout the project.

What this could look like: Researching which Country/s are involved before planning begins. Seeking Welcome to Country at openings. Acknowledging Country in exhibition materials.

2. Engage early and in genuine relationship

Consultation that happens at the end of a process, when decisions are already made, is not meaningful engagement. First Nations peoples should be part of the conversation from the earliest stages, with enough time to give considered input and for that input to genuinely shape the project.

What this could look like: Building First Nations engagement into the project timeline from the outset. Approaching community before a project is fully formed. Maintaining the relationship beyond the life of a single project.

3. Pay fairly and reduce cultural load

Consultation, advice, and cultural knowledge are professional contributions and should be remunerated at industry-standard rates. Asking First Nations people to share knowledge or give time without fair compensation is exploitative. Organisations should also be mindful of cultural load (the additional burden placed on First Nations individuals to educate, advise, and advocate), and take steps to reduce it.

What this could look like: Budgeting for First Nations consultation from the start. Drawing on existing resources, education programs, and First Nations-led materials to reduce the burden on individuals. Exploring co-creation, employment, and collaboration rather than one-off advice.

4. Protect cultural and intellectual property

First Nations cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) includes stories, images, symbols, songs, ceremonies, language, and knowledge. These are not in the public domain. Organisations working with First Nations content have a responsibility to understand ICIP principles and to handle cultural material with appropriate permissions, attribution, and care.

What this could look like: Familiarising your team with the Creative Australia ICIP Protocols ([creative.gov.au](https://creativecommons.gov.au)). Checking permissions for any First Nations imagery, language, or cultural content in your exhibition. Clarifying usage rights and restrictions with artists and communities.

5. Enable local determination

There is no single national approach to First Nations engagement that applies uniformly across the country. What is appropriate, meaningful, and led by community will look different depending on where you are, who you are working with, and what the project involves. Good practice supports the agency of local First Nations peoples to shape how engagement happens.

What this could look like: Asking rather than assuming. Following the lead of local First Nations peoples and organisations. Adapting your approach at each tour venue in response to local context and relationships.

Putting principles into practice

The following guidance is organised around the lifecycle of a touring project. It is not a checklist of boxes to tick but rather a set of prompts to help you think carefully about how First Nations engagement is woven through your work. The minimum standards checklist at the end of this document captures the baseline expectations for touring projects.

At the planning stage

Good engagement starts before a project is fully formed. At this stage, the questions to ask are foundational: whose Country will this project travel across? Does this exhibition involve First Nations stories, knowledge, objects, or imagery? Who should be part of this conversation, and when?

Consider the exhibition's connection to Country and First Nations cultural material. This includes artworks and objects made by First Nations artists, but also landscape imagery, native materials, stories, or themes that have cultural significance. Identify who holds cultural authority in relation to the content and the places the tour will visit.

Build time and budget for First Nations engagement into your project plan. Consultation that happens in a rush, or without resources, rarely serves anyone well.

During development and delivery

As the project develops, engagement should deepen. This might involve working with First Nations advisors, curators, or community members to review content, interpret materials, or co-develop resources. It might mean creating opportunities for employment, collaboration, or co-creation rather than one-off advice.

At each tour venue, work with the host to understand the local First Nations context. Different Country, different relationships, different protocols. Host venues are encouraged to draw on their own local First Nations connections and to build relationships that extend beyond a single exhibition.

Ensure that any First Nations content in the exhibition (including language, imagery, cultural objects, and stories), is handled in accordance with ICIP principles. If you are unsure, seek advice. The Creative Australia ICIP Protocols are the primary reference for the sector.

After the tour

Reflection is part of good practice. At the end of a project, consider what worked well, what you would do differently, and what relationships were built. Share these learnings within your organisation and with your stakeholders.

First Nations engagement does not end when an exhibition closes. Relationships built through a touring project should be honoured and, where possible, continued. Consider how your organisation's ongoing commitments carry this work forward.

Minimum standards checklist

The following represents the minimum standard expected of touring exhibitions in relation to First Nations engagement for touring projects. We encourage all parties to go further in response to local context, relationships, and community direction.

This checklist is for both tour organisers and host venues. Some items will be led by the organiser; others sit with the host. Where responsibilities are shared, communication between both parties is essential.

Country and cultural context

- **Identify the Country/s the tour will travel across**

Research which Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Country/s are involved, including Country connected to artists, objects, or stories in the exhibition.

- **Understand the cultural content of the exhibition**

Identify any First Nations artworks, objects, imagery, language, stories, or themes. Note who holds cultural authority in relation to this content.

- **Acknowledge Country in exhibition materials**

Include an Acknowledgement of Country in exhibition materials and at openings. Where appropriate, seek a Welcome to Country from a local Traditional Custodian.

Engagement and relationships

- **Begin engagement early**

First Nations engagement is built into the project timeline from planning not added at the end.

- **Identify relevant First Nations peoples, groups, or organisations to engage**

Consider who should be part of the conversation based on the content and the Country involved. Take direction from local First Nations communities on who the right people are.

- **Seek informed consent for involvement and attribution**

Any First Nations people contributing to the project as advisors, creatives, or collaborators, have been asked how they wish to be acknowledged and have given permission for that acknowledgement.

Fair remuneration and cultural load

- **Budget for First Nations engagement**

Consultation and advisory work by First Nations people is remunerated at industry-standard rates. This is included in the project budget from the outset.

- **Explore opportunities for employment, collaboration, or co-creation**

Consider where First Nations people can be involved as contributors, collaborators, or employees not only as consultants or advisors.

- **Draw on existing resources to reduce cultural load**

Use available First Nations-led resources, education programs, and materials to reduce the burden on individual First Nations people to educate and advise.

Cultural and intellectual property

- **Review the exhibition for ICIP considerations**

Any First Nations cultural content in the exhibition has been identified, and appropriate permissions, attribution, and usage protocols are in place.

- **Familiarise your team with the Creative Australia ICIP Protocols**

Staff and volunteers involved in the project are aware of the ICIP Protocols and know where to find guidance. See: creative.gov.au/first-nations-arts/protocols

- **Document any usage restrictions or cultural considerations**

Any cultural protocols, restrictions, or ongoing obligations connected to First Nations content in the exhibition are clearly documented and communicated across the project.

Local context and self-determination

- **Adapt your approach to local context at each venue**

Host venues engage with local First Nations peoples and organisations in a way that is appropriate to that Country and community avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

- **Connect this project to your organisation's broader First Nations commitments**

Where a RAP, First Nations engagement strategy, or funder requirements apply, this project contributes to those commitments.

- **Reflect and share learnings after the tour**

At the end of the project, document what worked, what could be improved, and what relationships were built. Share relevant learnings with NETS.

Further guidance and resources

These resources support good practice in First Nations engagement for arts and cultural organisations:

[Creative Australia — ICIP Protocols](#)

The primary reference for working with First Nations cultural and intellectual property in the arts sector in Australia.

[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#)

The international framework underpinning the rights of Indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination and cultural heritage.

[AMaGA — Indigenous Cultural Collections Roadmap](#)

Guidance for museums, galleries, and collecting institutions on Indigenous cultural materials, collections care, and community relationships.

[Reconciliation Australia](#)

Resources and support for organisations developing Reconciliation Action Plans and embedding reconciliation commitments into organisational practice.

This resource was created by First Nations Affairs and commissioned by NETS Australia.