

MEDIA RELEASE

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Saving SA Indigenous languages and stories - teaching and technology

A significant project to save the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara languages and community stories from dying out is reaching fruition in outback South Australia.

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands and the Maralinga Tjarutja Lands, Carclew Youth Arts is playing a leading role in an inclusive effort to teach and record Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara 'inma' – traditional ceremonies told through community stories and dances.

Carclew is working with Pitjantjatjara communities to create a DVD and book of key inma which community leaders can use to pass on these crucial cultural assets.

The project is called Tjitji Tjutaku Inma (loosely translated as 'Children's Ceremony').

"About six or seven years ago Pitjantjatjara elders developed the project idea because of their concerns their stories were in jeopardy," said Carclew's Community Program Manager, Lee-Ann Buckskin, who has played a vital role in the project.

"For example, faced with modern cultural pressures, fewer Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara children were learning the Anangu language and without the language you can't learn the inma."

But rather than simply record the inma for posterity, Carclew is working with the Pitjantjatjara to reverse the decline, to help retain the traditional languages and inma within Indigenous communities and at the same time provide skills training for young Indigenous participants.

"This is very much a community-driven project which has evolved from the ground up. Carclew was approached by the Anangu community to manage the project and to actively capture the stories and ceremonies," Lee-Ann said.

Tjitji Tjutaku Inma involves 11 Pitjantjatjara communities and 500 Indigenous school students.

"The elders from each community selected community custodians – individuals who have the status and knowledge to teach the inma," said Lee-Ann.

"In a concerted effort that teaching is now taking place in traditional settings. The language and stories are being passed on to children and young people and we're recording that."

Importantly, this teaching effort is being supported by the state government education system, at schools in the communities and Adelaide. The children are also being encouraged to talk to their family members about the stories, so the whole community is involved.

The children will soon perform the inma with Carclew recording the entire experience.

"Inma are elaborate; they involve the story, the language, the dance, the body paint and all the associated ceremonies," Lee-Ann said.

Vitally, the large majority of the work involved in the project is being carried out by community members themselves.

“The elders and cultural custodians are absolutely in charge of what happens. These stories are theirs.”

As part of the project young people aged between 16 and 25 will be employed to help run the project and provide translations for the DVD and book. A further 30 students from across the 11 participating communities are recording and reporting on the project, acting as on-site translators and interacting with the elders.

This project is funded through Federal Government Closing the Gap, Remote Service Delivery and Indigenous Language Support programs.

“By teaching the inma, the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara communities are saving their stories and their language from extinction,” Lee-Ann said.

“This is a truly wonderful project to be involved with.”

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