



Respecting First Nations' culture and heritage

Community factsheet

Investigating and minimising potential impacts to cultural heritage is an important step in planning a transmission project. This factsheet provides information about the cultural heritage assessment process, and the type of historic objects or activity that might make an area culturally significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) People.

Cultural heritage sites

First Nations peoples have long understood the importance of living in balance with the natural world and have developed traditional practices, knowledge and cultural identities which support this way of life. First Nations' cultures and heritages reflect ongoing interconnection with land and waters that pre-dates (Western) legal ownership.

Cultural heritage sites provide information about a region's history and culture and may also serve as sites for spiritual and cultural practice for First Nations communities. First Nations cultural heritage may relate to physical objects, places and traditions.

Some examples include:

- Tools and structures such as fish traps
- Shelters
- Places of songline and dreaming stories
- Burial grounds and/or remains
- Particular trees (such as birthing or funeral trees)
- Other places of historical or traditional significance.

"Culturally significant land" is the terminology used to describe locations where objects like these have been found, or activities have occurred. Culturally significant land is an important consideration when planning transmission infrastructure.

Sea Country also holds deep cultural, spiritual, and historical importance for many First Nations communities and is an important consideration for subsea transmission projects.



Transmission projects and culturally significant land

A project's location is a key factor when considering potential impacts on First Nations lands. For both overhead and underground transmission projects early identification of culturally significant heritage and places provides opportunity to choose a route that avoids or minimises impacts. For all transmission projects a cultural heritage assessment is undertaken for which formal approval is required from the relevant body – depending on the relevant legislation this may be the Registered Aboriginal Party, a state or territory authority, or/and a Commonwealth department.



Overhead transmission

Overhead transmission lines may impact culturally significant land through vegetation clearing and excavations at the locations required for constructing overhead towers and access tracks.

For overhead transmission lines, impacts to cultural heritage locations can be avoided through strategic siting of towers and tracks. For example, towers can be positioned so transmission line wires span any sensitive areas to avoid culturally significant lands. In some instances, helicopters can even be used to place towers/equipment to further minimise impacts to significant lands. Overhead transmission lines also allow for 'micro-siting', a process where small changes are made to avoid items of cultural significance that are unexpectedly found.

Underground transmission

For underground transmission, land clearing and excavation is required along the entire length of the transmission route, for installation of the underground infrastructure. Land clearing during construction and installation presents the greatest potential impact to First Nations culturally significant lands from underground transmission.

As undergrounding requires continuous trenching, significant ground disturbance, and rigid cables, it is more difficult to change the route during the construction phase. As with overhead infrastructure, route changes to avoid culturally significant land are best managed during the planning phase.

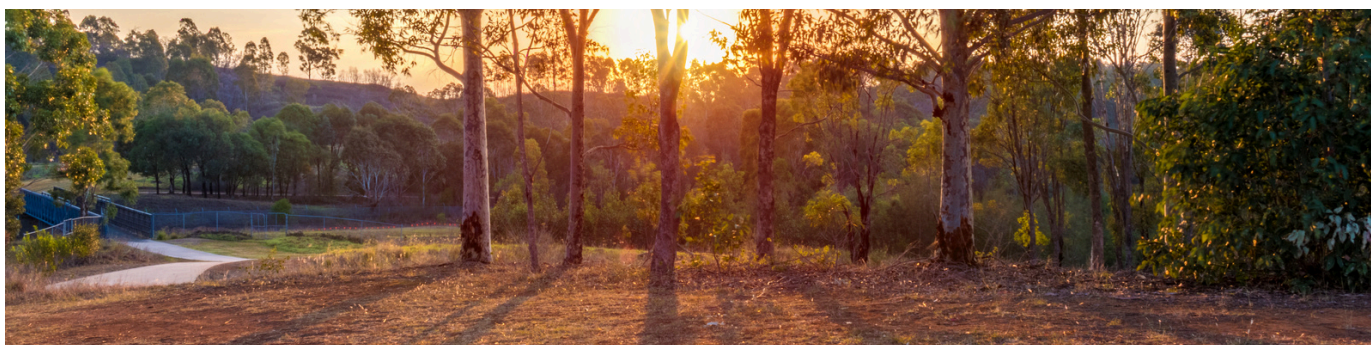


Discoveries during construction

While the cultural heritage assessment aims to be as comprehensive as possible, some culturally significant sites may not be found until construction. Heritage material can only be moved with appropriate approvals.

As part of a best practice approach, ground works stop, and the location of material is recorded.

Relevant cultural representatives are notified, and advice sought from the relevant heritage bodies, before construction continues. While most transmission businesses follow this best practice approach, more detailed information can be provided by each specific transmission business and in the project's approval conditions related to unexpected cultural heritage finds.



Identifying, avoiding and mitigating impacts

The cultural heritage assessment process is designed to help identify, avoid and mitigate impacts to First Nations culture and heritage. The process is the same for both overhead and underground transmission infrastructure. It involves:



First Nations engagement: Engaging with First Nations peoples who have a connection to the area to understand any concerns and to identify any culturally significant areas and co-design partnering opportunities. Engagement may include Traditional Owners, land councils, cultural knowledge holders, First Nations businesses, organisations, groups and communities.



Field survey: With participation from First Nations' representatives, undertake on-site surveys to locate, document, assess and evaluate the importance and value of any cultural heritage found.



Assessment and evaluation: Obtaining an independent review by cultural heritage experts, to assess the importance and value of any cultural heritage found.



Early research: Working with First Nations peoples to gather local knowledge on any existing heritage sites, in addition to information collected from previous research and historical documents, and also to review any renewable energy specific or Whole-of-Country plans that may be in development or completed.



Reporting: Preparing a comprehensive heritage assessment report that outlines the study findings and recommendations, including strategies to mitigate potential negative impacts to cultural heritage.



Compliance: Implementing planned management actions and strategies to minimise negative impacts during construction and ongoing operation.

Who is responsible for the cultural heritage assessment?

The transmission business, as the project proponent is responsible for undertaking the cultural heritage assessment. Transmission businesses are legally required to engage an independent, qualified professional to perform the assessment. The transmission business is then required to report on the outcomes of the assessment and details of any mitigation measures to be taken, with a view to minimising any disturbance to First Nations' cultural heritage or culturally significant lands.

Transmission businesses have clear protocols for working on or around culturally significant land that is found at any stage of the project life cycle. These protocols apply regardless of whether the project is an overhead or underground infrastructure project.

Traditional Owners and cultural knowledge holders have been looking after Country and providing stewardship of culturally significant sites for 60,000 years. Project proponents should view engagement as a relationship-building opportunity, where arrangements to partner with First Nations groups to provide stewardship of transmission easements or connected areas through Ranger Groups or Indigenous-owned maintenance crews can be established during or following the heritage assessment process.



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