



Culture and Heritage: Oral History

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**Australia: State of the Environment
Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage)**



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Contents	Page
Preface	5
Acknowledgements	5
Abstract	7
Summary	7
1 Methodology	8
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 Methodological specifications	9
2 Findings and discussion	10
2.1 State	10
2.2 Pressures	13
2.3 Responses	14
3 Evaluation of pilot questionnaire	16
4 General recommendations	17
5 Key indicators	18
6 Suggested reading for oral history practitioners	19
6.1 Bibliography	19
Appendix 1: Pilot questionnaire	23
Appendix 2: Institutions surveyed and interviewed	31
List of Figures	
Figure 1: Awareness of oral history’s potential in heritage work	11
Figure 2: Use of collections in heritage work	11
Figure 3: Date of establishment of projects	11
Figure 4: Environment focus of oral history projects	13
Figure 5: Frequency (per annum) of use of oral history collections	14
Figure 6: Importance of projects’ impact on local groups	14
Figure 7: Importance of projects’ impact on professional heritage practitioners	14
Figure 8: Location of oral history collections	15
Figure 9: Importance of localities in oral history interviews	15

List of Tables

Table 1: Institutional/geographical distribution of participants interviewed1	9
Table 2: Distribution of current oral history projects among survey respondents	10
Table 3: Project productivity by date of establishment	12
Table 4: Project productivity by institutional type	12
Table 5: Number of people involved in oral history projects	17

Preface

Australia: State of the Environment 1996 (the first ever independent and comprehensive assessment of the state of Australia's environment) was presented to the Commonwealth Environment Minister in 1996. This landmark report, which draws upon the expertise of a broad section of the Australian scientific and technical community, was prepared by seven expert reference groups working under the broad direction of an independent State of the Environment Advisory Council. While preparing the report, the former Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, on behalf of the reference groups, commissioned a number of specialist technical papers. These have been refereed and are now being published as the State of the Environment Technical Paper Series. Reflecting the theme chapters of the report, the papers relate to human settlements, biodiversity, the atmosphere, land resources, inland waters, estuaries and the sea, and natural and cultural heritage. The topics covered range from air and water quality to sea grasses and historic shipwrecks.

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study commissioned to undertake qualitative research into the utilisation of oral history techniques in both contemporary heritage practice and in the assessment of heritage significance over the last decade. The study indicates the extent to which organisations and groups involved in oral history—ranging from local amateur societies to national institutions—use oral sources in heritage work. It also shows that many of those engaged in oral history projects are not fully aware of the importance of recording the relationships between people and places/sites in the natural, built or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environments. The paper makes a number of recommendations including: further development of the pilot questionnaire; investigation of the needs of oral historians; development of and training in methodology; and resources to support work needed to understand, protect and conserve cultural and heritage places and sites in our environment.

Summary

The approach to national state of the environment reporting adopted in Australia is based on a modified version of the model suggested by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the ‘pressure-state-response’ model. Australia has modified this linear model to include a more interactive approach that incorporates consideration of cultural influences, the limited knowledge we have of the Australian environment and the potentially rich resource residing in both individual and community memory. This model provides a framework for this summary and the discussion presented in the paper.

State

There is widespread appreciation of the potential of oral history research for Australians’ understanding of places and sites in the natural, built or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environments. Indeed, 85% of respondents agreed that places and localities were becoming an increasingly important part of their interviews. While the majority of recent oral history projects have not specifically addressed places and sites in the natural, built, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environments, a growing number of oral historians now recognise places and sites as critical components of their research. This importance is likely to continue increasing as local history groups become more active in oral history research, particularly since locality forms the primary focus of investigation for such groups.

The bulk of oral history projects currently being conducted are undertaken or commissioned by major government institutions. Local groups and organisations generally lack the resources to undertake oral history, though most expressed a desire to collect and preserve oral sources.

There is a general confusion among practitioners of oral history about basic historiographical concepts, notably in relation to thematic work.

Pressures

The study and recording of oral history in Australia is chronically under-resourced at the local and regional level. This lack of resources is of most concern in that it restricts local groups’ access to training, the required technology, and personnel. Conservation, storage and access to collections are areas where similar problems exist.

The work undertaken at the local level in oral history research is primarily undertaken by volunteers and maintained on shoe-string budgets, often financed by those same volunteers.

Most oral history collections in Australia—particularly those at the local level—are to all intents and purposes inaccessible, due primarily to the resource-intensive nature of documenting, circulating, and coordinating this information.

Responses

Responses to pressures at the local level are ad hoc and in general ineffective. In the majority of cases this is because local studies of any kind, including oral

history research, are commonly thought to be a responsibility of the least affluent level of government—local authorities. And, while some Local Government Authorities (LGAs) do provide limited funding (primarily to the local library) the majority do not. There is no access to on-going funding at a state or federal level; there are occasional small sums available as ‘one-off’ funding. Any funding available at state or federal levels is most often channelled into projects considered to be appropriate to that level, ie the national and state libraries, and state museums.

Some state libraries are attempting to provide training for local groups wishing to undertake oral history research (generally as half or one-day workshops). It is the authors’ opinion however, that these are generally insufficient for dealing with the broad range of issues the methodology involves, and in some cases may assist to spread misapprehension about historical endeavour, and about the appropriate applications of oral history data in particular.

Recommendations

This pilot survey should be refined and conducted with a larger sample.

An assessment should be made of the utilisation of resources at federal, state, regional and local levels. It is the authors’ opinion that local government should not be expected to bear all responsibility for funding projects which are of such great value to the whole country. Furthermore, federally coordinated assistance should be provided to enable:

- training programs (including historical training and conservation techniques)
- access to appropriate technology for recording and transcription
- opportunities for interested people who are currently in retraining/job-skill/work-experience programs, to benefit from exposure to the wide range of skills which the methodology demands.

1 Methodology

1.1 Introduction

The former Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, on behalf of the State of the Environment Natural and Cultural Heritage Reference Group commissioned the Centre for

Community History at the University of New South Wales to research ‘Local History, Oral History and Oral Traditions’ as currently practised in Australia in relation to heritage work, and to investigate and identify any changes which may have affected such practice over the past ten years. This commission reflects the growing recognition of the importance of a knowledge of oral history and folk traditions as critical tools for investigating the cultural and historical significance of buildings, sites and places in Australia. It is envisaged that future reports on the state of the environment will utilise the data provided in this paper to assess the ‘health’ of this research methodology in the future, thus a critical outcome of this research was to establish key indicators and base-line data for such future use.

A definition of oral history was one of the objectives of this paper. For the purposes of the questionnaire a definition was not overtly stated. Rather, it was left to the respondents to provide the interviewers with a subjective appraisal of their own techniques and desired outcomes.

From the authors’ viewpoint oral history can be defined as the results of historical research, undertaken by trained historians or by amateur historians with some training, through tape-recorded interviews with individuals with knowledge/experience of the subject matter in question. While a degree of flexibility of this definition is required—for example to include those who consider the taped-word of more importance than the transcribed-word—the condition that the interview be based upon more traditional historical research (where possible) and structured around a particular aspect (or theme) of the past is mandatory. Placing a tape recorder in front of an individual in order to tape random recollections is **not** considered to be valid oral history research.

However, a useful refinement to the next questionnaire would attempt to more overtly check this definition against the respondents’ conception of oral history. This is therefore included as a recommendation.

This paper represents the results of the first major survey of its kind into oral history practice in Australia. Given the extremely limited period of time which the project was given, the researchers needed to define the brief into a manageable research project. While maintaining as the major objective the elucidation of the state of oral history in Australia, this

was undertaken by a ‘slice’ approach, that is by interviewing at least one (but in most cases several) representatives of each of the major selected groups undertaking such oral history research in Australia.

The Centre for Community History has worked in the field of community-based history for the past nine years and was thus in a position to know intimately many relevant individuals and groups. The expertise of the Centre’s staff was also a crucial element in the way the questionnaire was worded and administered.

The necessarily small size of the sample in the pilot survey combined with an in-built bias of the questionnaire (which only became apparent during its administration) meant that some of the responses to this survey are inaccurate or contradict the experience and expectations of the Centre’s staff. Where such anomalies occur the authors have included additional information garnered from their own experiences, as well as providing additional information which may help to explain such anomalies. Further, options for correcting the in-built bias of this questionnaire—as well as its administration to a more representative sample—form part of the *Recommendations* segment of this paper.

1.2 Methodological specifications

A pilot questionnaire was devised by Louella McCarthy and Paul Ashton (Centre for Community History, University of New South Wales) in consultation with Dr Rosemary Purdie, Professor

Isabel McBryde and Alex Marsden from the State of the Environment Culture and Heritage Reference Group. The creation of the data-base and statistical analysis was undertaken by Hamish Graham (School of History, University of New South Wales). Research assistance in administering the questionnaire was provided by Blaise Lyons and Karen O’Brien (School of History, University of New South Wales).

This questionnaire was designed to elicit information concerning the state of current oral history projects being conducted in Australia in relation to heritage practice. In accordance to the brief, the pilot questionnaire sought to develop indicators to gauge the ‘health’ of oral history practice in relation to buildings, places and sites. These indicators related to past and present states of oral history practice, contemporary pressures on oral history projects, and current responses to these pressures. (The pilot questionnaire is attached as Appendix 1.)

Due to major time constraints, the questionnaire was designed as a pilot survey to be administered to a limited though representative sample of organisations and groups involved in oral history. The sample was constructed to represent all Australian states and territories. Within each state and territory the sample included local, regional, state and federally based projects. (See Table 1.) The sample of local groups was designed to include urban and rural representatives. (See Appendix 2 for a full list of the pilot survey sample.)

Table 1: Institutional/geographical distribution of participants interviewed¹

Type of institution	Geographical distribution of projects								Total number of projects
	National	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA	
Universities		3	1	1			1	1	7
Libraries	1	2		1	1	1			6
Museums		2		2	1	2	2	1	10
Historical societies		7		4	3	1	7	2	24
Government departments/ Statutory authorities	1	2					1		4
Other					1	1			2
TOTAL	2	16	1	8	6	5	11	4	53

1. One hundred and thirty-six contacts were attempted, fifty-three were interviewed.

Table 2: Distribution of current oral history projects among survey respondents¹

Type of institution	Geographical distribution of projects								Total number of projects
	National	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA	
Universities		2		1				1	4
Libraries	1	3			1				5
Museums		1		1		1	2	1	6
Historical societies		1				1	1		3
Government departments/ Statutory authorities	1						1		2
Other					1				1
TOTAL	2	7	0	2	2	2	4	2	21

1. Fifty-three people were interviewed and twenty-one of these were currently engaged in **relevant** oral history projects.

Due again to time constraints, the vast majority of questionnaires were administered by telephone. This had both negative and positive effects. First, by requiring an immediate response, those surveyed did not have time to consider the full ramifications of their responses, nor to check their accuracy: this was particularly evident for responses requiring specific information, such as the number of oral history interviews the respondents themselves had conducted. On the other hand, when respondents feel that it will take only a few moments and that they will not have to write out and mail back the questionnaire, a greater success rate can be achieved. Nonetheless, a number of groups were afforded, when required, an opportunity to view a faxed copy of the questionnaire prior to the telephone interview.

In all, fifty-three interviews were conducted out of a total of 136 attempted contacts. Of these, twenty-one institutions, groups and organisations were currently conducting oral history projects. (See Table 2.)

Of the twenty-one groups/institutions surveyed, the majority are libraries, museums and universities—that is, those institutions with a more ready access to government funding.

2 Findings and discussion

2.1 State

In general, oral history practice in Australia is not designed to investigate or illuminate the history or significance of specific places or sites. While

respondents felt that oral history research could provide a valuable source of information on these issues, few projects were specifically designed to do so.

The majority of oral history projects focus on people (and biography) rather than places. While there are instances of overlap and relationships between individuals and sites, both the importance of that relationship and its implications are increasingly recognised.

On the whole, respondents were enthusiastic about the potential for oral history to investigate or illuminate the history or significance of specific places or sites.

Just under a third of respondents (30%) indicated some change over time in their approaches, methods or objectives. This could be seen as a reflection of several important aspects of oral history as practised. For example, it seemed that few practitioners of oral history knew their collections' aims and objectives well. Nor were many practitioners alert to the importance of change in an historical sense; in essence, few respondents were conversant with the significant historiographical issues influencing their craft. (See Section 6, *Suggested readings for practitioners.*)

The vast majority of respondents recognised the potential of oral history sources in heritage related work. (See Figure 1.)

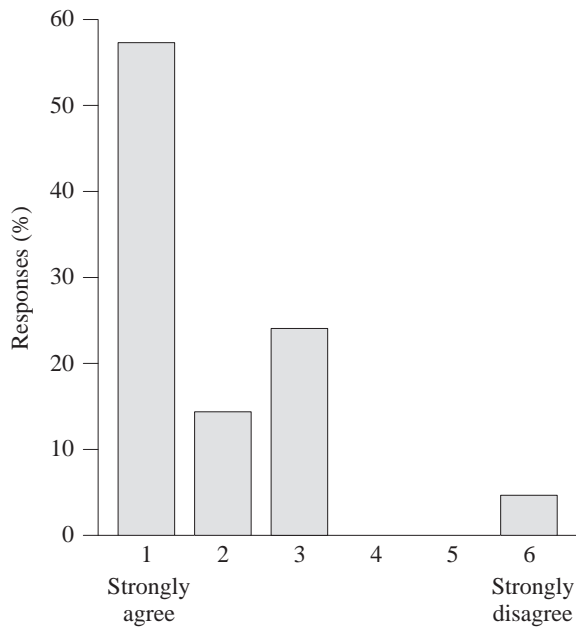


Figure 1: Awareness of oral history’s potential in heritage work

Note: Survey Question 22 (b), Would you agree/disagree that over the past 10 years people have become more aware of the potential for Oral History in heritage-related work? N=21, no response=0.

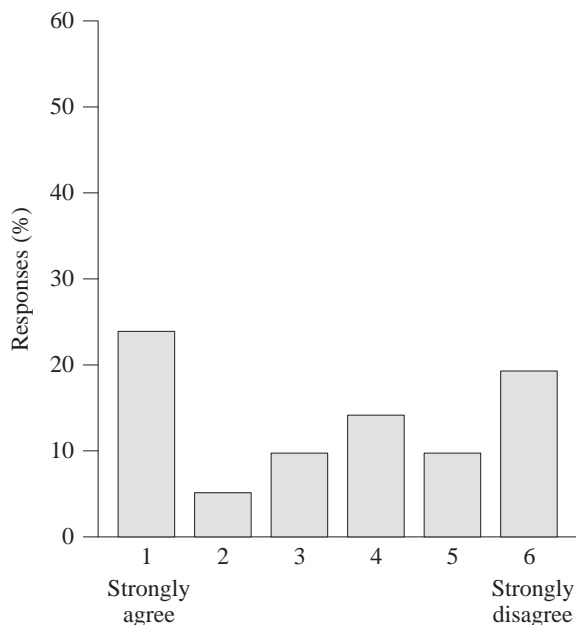


Figure 2: Use of collections in heritage work

Note: Survey Question 22 (c), Would you agree/disagree that over the past ten years your collection has been used increasingly in heritage studies? N=21, no response=0.

While it was recognised that oral history is of great potential to heritage-related work, respondents did not believe professional heritage practitioners currently took advantage of this resource. (See Figure 2.)

The vast bulk of projects (86%) commenced in the last decade. Half of these commenced in the last four years. (See Figure 3.) The authors feel that this reflects the growing interest in Australian history in general. While it is difficult to pinpoint a causative factor to this growth it is possible to correlate it with Australia’s bicentennial celebrations in 1988 and a growth in the promotion of an Australian sense of identity. Another aspect of this finding though, is that many oral history projects are designed to be short-term, for instance to support a particular research project. The spasmodic nature of projects is often a product of the ‘one-off’ funding mentioned earlier, or the reliance on a ‘sympathetic’ local council—in which the level of influence of advocates for such projects fluctuates.

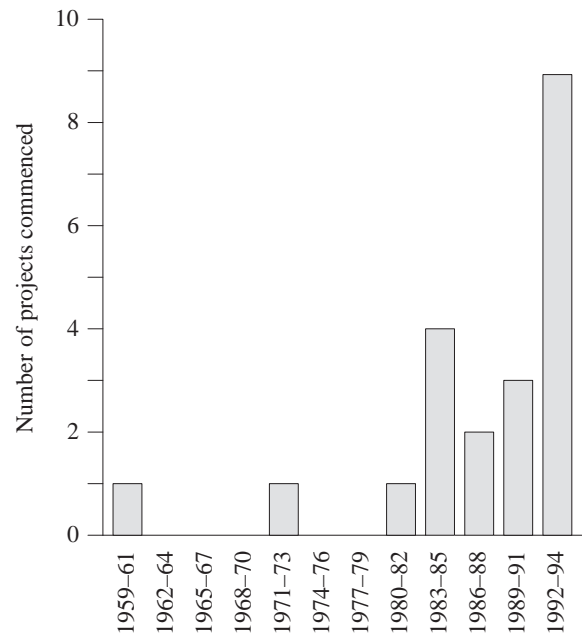


Figure 3: Date of establishment of projects

Survey Question 3, When was your Oral History project established? N=21.

The majority of oral history projects are short to medium term. As mentioned, this often correlates with the need of a particular research project, and a lack of access to on-going funding.

Table 3: Project productivity by date of establishment

Year project established	Number of oral history interviews conducted									Total projects
	Zero	1-5	6-10	11-30	31-50	51-100	100-200	200+	Don't know	
1992-94	1	2	2	2	1				1	9
1989-91				2	1					3
1986-88							1	1		2
1983-85		1				1		1	1	4
1980-82						1				1
1970s								1		1
1960s									1	1
Total	1	3	2	4	2	2	1	3	3	21

The majority of projects have a small output. (See Table 3.) Again, this is probably a product of the labour-intensive nature of the methodology and the widespread reliance on voluntary activity.

Oral history in Australia is primarily undertaken or funded by government instrumentalities—local, state or Federal. (See Table 4.)

The backgrounds of people in key training service positions are primarily in librarianship rather than in history.

Most oral history projects (about 75%) have procedures in place for documenting their collections. It would appear, however, that in most instances procedures for indexing and transcription do not facilitate ease of access to these collections. This is a product of the 'newness' of oral history as a historical methodology (and the concomitant lack of a standard thesaurus containing keywords for finding aids) for dealing with the information so gathered.

Table 4: Project productivity by institutional type

Type of institution	Number of oral history interviews conducted									Total institutions
	Zero	1-5	6-10	11-30	31-50	51-100	100-200	200+	Don't Know	
Universities	1		1			1		1		4
Libraries						1	1	1	2	5
Museums		2		2	1			1		6
Historical societies		1		1					1	3
Government departments/ Statutory authorities				1	1					2
Other			1							1
Total	1	3	2	4	2	2	1	3	3	21

There seems to be some confusion among practitioners concerning historiographical terms/approaches. For example, 86% of respondents indicated that their work was thematic in nature. But it is not clear how such ‘themes’ are effectively differentiated from the still-widespread biographical concerns of oral histories which seek merely to document people’s lives at the expense of the subjects’ physical and material surroundings.

There is a general lack of awareness of the nature and role of themes in historical work. The only exceptions were the large state/regional museums such as the Queensland Museum, and the State Museum of Victoria who use professional staff trained in historical research techniques.

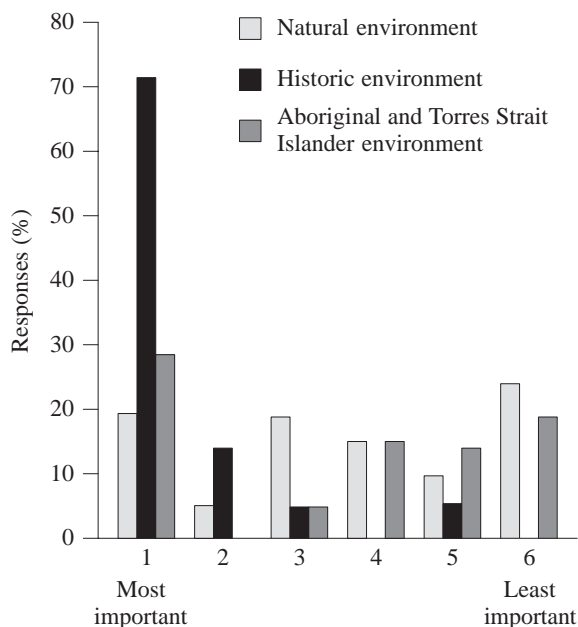


Figure 4: Environment focus of oral history projects

Survey Question 14. To what extent does your Oral History project relate to:

- (a) the natural environment?
- (b) the historic environment?
- (c) the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environment?

N=21,

- (a) no response = 0;
- (b) no response = 1;
- (c) no response = 4.

The natural environment represents only a small selection of the oral history research focus. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environment is likewise significantly under-researched by non-Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander projects. (See Figure 4.)

2.2 Pressures

The greatest pressure on oral history at the local level is the lack of human resources.

Material support and funding are identified as another serious pressure on projects in general.

Lack of skills and access to information and training have a negative impact on oral history endeavour. Most local groups expressed strong desires for interaction with professional historians in order both to learn new skills and to discuss more generally the findings and interpretation of their own research. Many local groups undertake this research on a voluntary basis and most are therefore unable to devote the required resources (both time and financial) to undertake full-length degree programs to learn these new skills. While a number do so, many more are interested in short-term diplomas or certificated courses specifically designed around their needs and resources. While this need is being met in the United Kingdom, and to some extent the United States of America, it is not yet being addressed to any great extent in Australia.

A knowledge of the situation in Australia suggests to the authors that, despite claims by some participants in the survey on the provision of ‘full access’ to their collections, a profound lack of access to collections operates at present and militates against their widespread use in the investigation of sites and places. This relates especially to aspects such as documentation. (See Figure 5.) A serious implication of these responses relates to the two largest categories being ‘no access or N/A’ and ‘unknown’. Local projects are dispersed, having little communication either with each other or with the wider community. While large organisations such as the National Library have on-line access, local groups rarely own a computer, and almost never have the expertise or the wherewithal to publish guides to their collections.

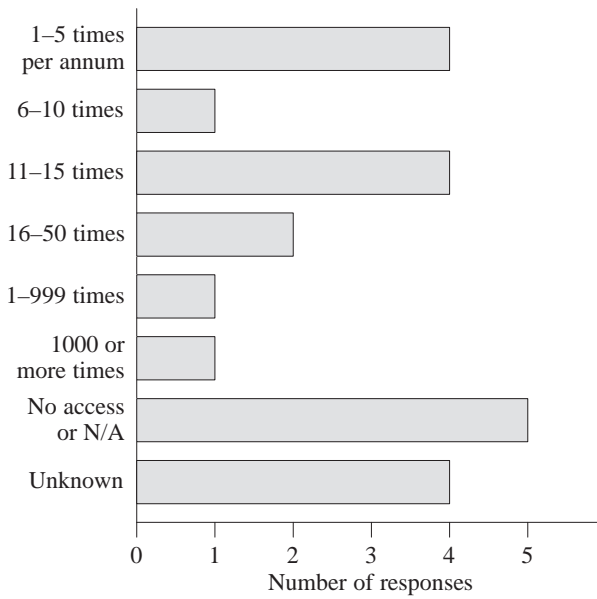


Figure 5: Frequency (per annum) of use of oral history collections

Survey Question 18. How often is your oral history collection accessed by others? N=22 [one respondent identified two collection locations].

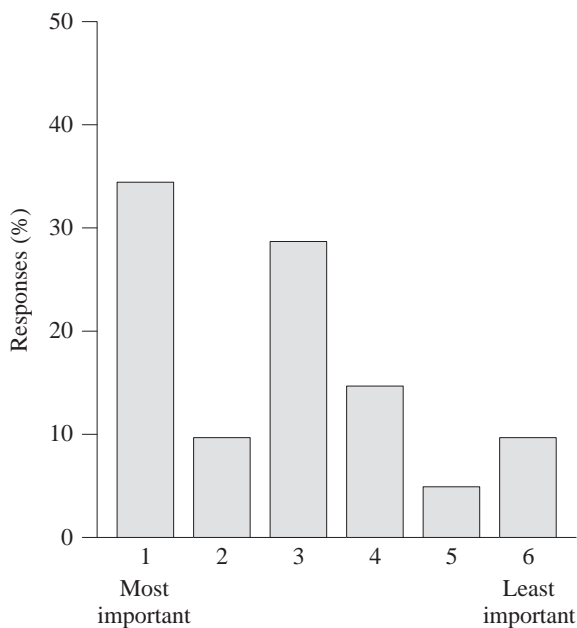


Figure 6: Importance of projects' impact on local groups

Survey Question 25(f). How important an impact has your project had on local groups? N=21, no responses=0.

As discussed in the Australian Heritage Commission 1994, *Method papers: East Gippsland and Central Highlands Joint Forest Project*, vol. 2, Canberra, p. 6, a variety of indicators suggest that there is at the local level, a wealth of knowledge about specific places and sites, and heritage in general (particularly 'social value'). (See Figure 6.)

It may be significant that it was projects with a local/community/regional basis which tended to place emphasis on their local impact. By contrast, state and national institutions (especially libraries and universities) were more likely to discount this effect. Despite this, there seems to be a knowledge/skills barrier pertaining to professional heritage work among local groups and individuals which needs to be broken down via public education programs. (See Figure 7.)

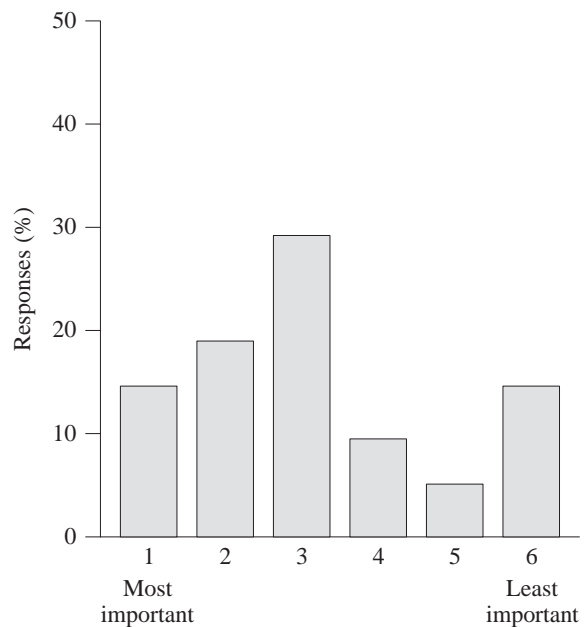


Figure 7: Importance of projects' impact on professional heritage practitioners

Survey Question 25(b). How important an impact has your project had on professional heritage practitioners? N=21, no responses=2.

2.3 Responses

A limited number of training programs have been developed. These vary in type and quality but primarily take the form of half to one-day workshops. It is the authors' belief that valuable as these types of short workshops may be, they are not sufficiently rigorous to stand alone.

Major institutions have utilised, or are considering AARNet (Australian Academic Research Network) in attempts to facilitate access to their collections.

Major institutions have begun to develop key-word thesauruses to improve and standardise access to collections. This should take the form of a coordinated activity

Some groups have employed professional historians. Bodies most likely to employ professional historians are large (state-financed) museums, and the National Library.

Most attempts to overcome the lack of human resources at the local level have been made through personal networks. By-and-large these have not been effective. The most likely reasons for this are the labour-intensive nature of oral history research, and a widespread insecurity when first using the method. Whereas archival/library research has traditionally been conducted by an individual historian, whose reading of the documentary sources was essentially 'private', oral history is a more 'performance-based' methodology, which overtly records the researcher's thoughts and assumptions—an aspect which can be daunting for newcomers to the method. Better access to historical training would help obviate this problem through providing greater confidence in both the researchers' ability and their understanding of the methodology.

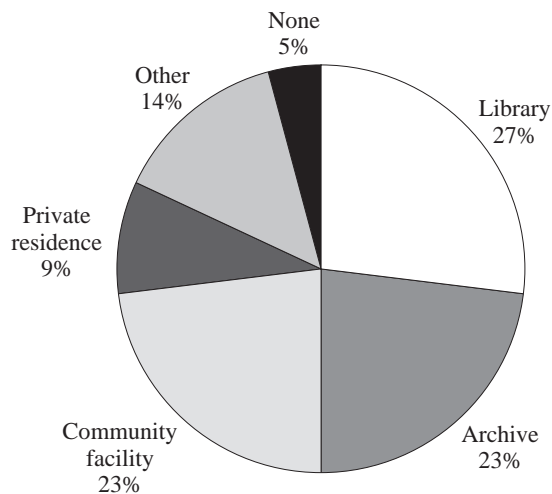


Figure 8: Location of oral history collections

Survey Question 15. Where is your oral history collection housed? N=22 [one respondent identified two collection locations].

Approximately 50 per cent of oral history collections are currently housed in a professional library or archive. The growth over the past ten years of both local studies collections in local libraries (particularly in NSW), and of state libraries' interest in this methodology, have improved access to professional archival repositories. Nonetheless, the growing awareness and participation by amateur local groups in oral history collection will put pressure on these repositories, as well as seeing the likelihood of more collections being housed inappropriately in the future. (See Figure 8.)

Respondents believed that localities are becoming an increasingly important aspect of oral history interviews. (See Figure 9.) This reflects the growing importance given to a 'sense of place' in Australian historiography generally. As more local groups become involved in oral history collection it is probable that locality will be assigned even greater prominence given that local historical societies' primary investigative focus is the local area.

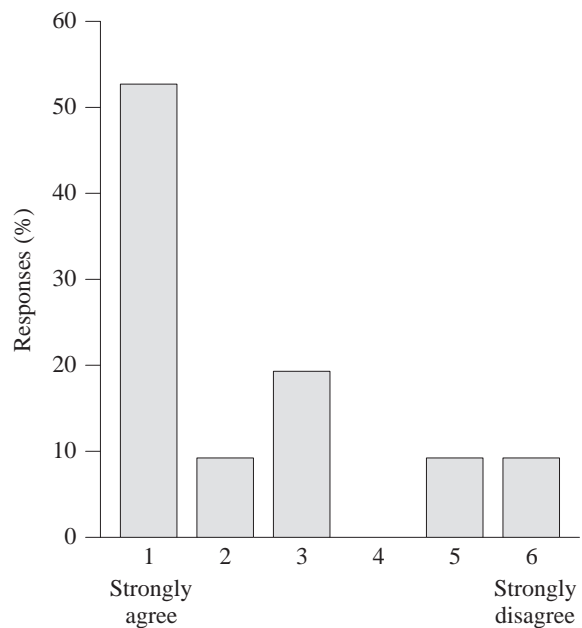


Figure 9: Importance of localities in oral history interviews

Survey Question 22(d). Would you agree/disagree that over the past ten years localities have become an increasingly important part of oral history interviews? N=21, no responses=0.

3 Evaluation of pilot questionnaire

For the general purposes of this survey the pilot questionnaire proved satisfactory. Nonetheless, there are necessary refinements which have become apparent during the administration of this survey and in the analysis of its results.

First and most importantly, an in-built bias of the questionnaire was found through our discussions with many local historical societies. This bias was a result of structuring the questionnaire around the principle of a 'current project'. The authors originally felt that this was the best and most efficient gauge of the current state of oral history practice. But it was found that, due to the propensity of oral history research to be spasmodic, one-off or short-term, many groups with an interest in oral history and a desire to participate more regularly, were not reflected in the results of the questionnaire (although many of the relevant comments and concerns by these groups helped to structure this final paper). Thus we have made a recommendation that the questionnaire should be refined to allow for individuals and groups who, while not currently involved in an oral history project, had done in the past, or express a strong interest in doing so. Such a refinement would shed further light on pressures involved in developing and running an oral history project, particularly at the local level.

In a similar vein, the concept of an oral history 'project' needs to be given some thought. A number of individuals/organisations interviewed argued that while they were not conducting a specific 'project', they had nonetheless undertaken some oral history research. Similarly, one respondent from a large organisation differentiated between a current 'project' with a specific theme as opposed to the organisation's overall oral history 'program'. This can be contrasted with another major institution which was happy to refer to all oral history research it had undertaken as a 'project'. The authors feel that the term 'project' should be dispensed with and replaced with 'oral history research and/or collection'.

More detailed questions concerning changes over time within oral history research activities should be developed, including related question(s) concerning

the factors influencing these changes. This could be structured around questions about the changes affecting the practice of history more generally in Australia and how these changes have been reflected in the practice of oral history. Recognising that many groups undertaking oral history (particularly but not solely, local history groups) do not include trained historians, a series of 'prompted' possible answers would be the best way of undertaking this.

More detailed questioning needs to be undertaken concerning the respondents' definition of oral history, and their research methodologies.

More consideration needs to be given to questions concerning access and the methods of publicising the existence and use of collections.

It was brought to the authors' attention during the administration of the pilot questionnaire that the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA) was to undertake a major survey of oral history collections in Australia in February 1995. The objectives of the OHAA survey are quite distinct from the inquiry which formed the basis of this paper, the OHAA is primarily concerned with documenting the existence of collections. The authors feel that the results of this second survey might well form the basis of a very useful database, providing access to many of the collections now deemed inaccessible. If this is accepted a further question in the refined questionnaire could attempt to ascertain if the respondent's collection was included in the OHAA's database.

The questionnaire now needs to be targeted more rigorously at:

- major collection and site museums
- community museums
- local and family historical societies
- local libraries and other local government projects
- public/freelance historians.

All of these groups have a relevant peak body and/or directory through which contact information is available. To undertake such research however, a period of at least 6 to 12 months should be dedicated. A preliminary estimate of the 'oral history population' is estimated given in Table 5.

Table 5: Number of people involved in oral history projects

Type of groups or individual involved in oral history projects	Estimated number active in each group
Local historical societies	2000
State/national libraries	8
State funded museums	
collection and site museums	200
Local government authorities	
community museums	500
local studies libraries	100
miscellaneous local government authority projects	50
Public/freelance historians	150
Academic historians	500
Individual amateurs	500
Total number involved in groups and as individuals	3500 approximately

4 General recommendations

It is clear from responses to this survey that oral history was considered to be central for understanding the significance of places, buildings and sites. To date though, the requisite impetus—or demand—has not led many individuals, groups or organisations to pursue this research topic. It may also be said that oral history is especially crucial to the identification and assessment of social values within their own context as they relate to specific places and sites. Oral history is vital to the identification and assessment of intangible heritage and its relationship to natural, built, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environments. In terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, knowledge of oral history, folklore and traditions is often the only way of ascertaining, assessing and assigning significance; it is the only way of dealing with spiritual significance and with the heritage of communities with no written traditions.

The survey elicited great enthusiasm on the part of local communities to participate in dialogue with

government agencies and professionals. It is strongly felt that, in addition to the following recommendations, this dialogue should be maintained and expanded.

It is hoped that this survey, in conjunction with the national State of the Environment report will contribute to a greater awareness of the importance of the role of oral history projects in researching and understanding heritage value in Australia’s diverse cultural environment. Equally the authors hope that this survey contributes to oral history practitioners becoming more aware of the value of including ‘place’ as a focus for historical enquiry.

Recommendation 1: Conduct a larger, more refined survey of the use of oral history in heritage work

The Pilot Survey should be thoroughly assessed, reworked and re-administered at some time in the future. As discussed in Section 4, these refinements should at least:

- (a) recognise that oral history research is often one-off, spasmodic or short-term and to make such amendments as required to include such research within the survey
- (b) omit the term ‘project’ and replace it with ‘oral history research and/or collection’
- (c) include prompted questions concerning change over time in history and oral history
- (d) include questions seeking definition of oral history and methodology
- (e) clarify questions concerning access and usage.

The questionnaire should then be re-administered, either once to a larger, more representative sample, or to a number of small-group samples over a longer period of time.

Recommendation 2: Adapt the survey to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples using oral history in heritage work

Given the low level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the survey (a product of the lack of time, and the time of year undertaken) additional work needs to be undertaken to redress this imbalance. It may be appropriate to develop a series of specifically designed questions, dealing with issues of particular significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in relation to oral history/traditions, and places and sites.

Recommendation 3: Assess skills and resources needed to support the use of oral history in heritage work

It is strongly recommended that general assessment be undertaken at local, regional, state and federal levels of the skills and resources needed to undertake oral history work in relation to sites and places. This would seem to be particularly important given the profound lack of the resources necessary to undertake this work experienced by many local groups. Local groups see oral history research in heritage as being important and an activity that they would willingly undertake given access to support as follows:

- (a) creation of a key-word thesaurus to assist with indexing collections
- (b) improved access to computer technology
- (c) access to short-term, open learning style history courses at certificate and diploma levels
- (d) improved access to information on conservation/preservation of audio materials
- (e) information about and access to requisite recording equipment and audio-tapes, and transcription machines
- (f) on-going provision of half or one-day workshops on skills specific to the methodology (e.g. editing; copyright and other legal aspects; indexing; etc.).

5 Key indicators

Following is a list of indicators that may be used to assess the effectiveness of the contribution that oral history practitioners make to the understanding and protection of heritage in buildings, places and sites:

- (a) participation by local (i.e. amateur) groups
- (b) activity by state/federal institutions
- (c) provision of resources to local groups by local government
- (d) provision of resources by state governments
- (e) provision of support by federal governments
- (f) provision of resources by private industry
- (g) human resources
- (h) coordination of activity
- (i) interest by local groups
- (j) level of interviewing activity
- (k) interest by heritage practitioners
- (l) access to collections
- (m) training
- (n) involvement of professional historians
- (o) general interest in oral history
- (p) duration of research project
- (q) procedures
- (r) success at attracting new volunteers
- (s) research themes.

6 Suggested reading for oral history practitioners

Following is a number of guides to the practice of oral history in Australia. None of these is definitive, but each is useful.

Beth M. Robertson 1994, *Oral history handbook*, 3rd edn, Oral History Association of Australia, Adelaide.

Paul Ashton 1995, *On the record: A practical guide to oral history*, 3rd edn, Stanton Library, North Sydney.

Louise Douglas, Alan Roberts & Ruth Thompson 1992, *Oral history: A handbook*, Allen & Unwin.

Readers may also consult Janis Wilton 1996, *Oral history in Australia: A list*, Oral History Association of Australia, Sydney, which is the most recent and comprehensive bibliography of oral history in Australia.

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Appendix 1: Pilot questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire has been commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories on behalf of the State of the Environment Natural and Cultural Heritage Reference Group. It is being administered by the Centre for Community History at the University of New South Wales.

The aim of the questionnaire is to assess the role that oral history plays in contributing to our understanding of the significance of sites, places and localities. These sites, places and localities can pertain to both the natural and cultural environments.

To achieve this aim we would like to gauge approximately how much work is being done in the field of oral history which either relates to sites, places and localities or has been used in heritage work.

We also want to identify the problems and issues which are affecting the recording of oral histories related to places and the ways in which you have responded to these problems. We are also interested in your ideas as to how valuable oral history is in relation to determining the significance of places.

Please answer the following question so that we can determine whether it is appropriate to include your project in our survey:

Have you or your project collected any oral accounts relating to specific places in the natural or built environment or to places of significance for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people? (Please circle.)

(a) Yes

(b) No

If you answered 'Yes', we would greatly appreciate if you could spare the few minutes to provide information about your own oral history collections. This questionnaire is being administered by phone.

SECTION ONE

Project Background

1. What is the name of your institution/organisation/groups/or projects?

2. How long has your project been in existence?
3. When was your oral history project established?
4. What is the aim/s of your projects?
5. (i) Has the aim/s of your projects changed over time? (Please circle) Yes / No
(ii) Please summarise these changes.
6. Has the aim/s or approaches of your project been influenced by any of the following?
(Please indicate the level of influence by using a scale of 1 to 6 where 1 is highly influential and 6 is low influence).
- | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (a) Government policies (Please specify) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (b) Human resources | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (c) Public opinion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (d) Professional advice/opinions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (e) Funding programs (Please specify) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (f) Other (Please specify) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
7. (i) Does your project entail (Please circle):
- | | |
|---|----------|
| (a) The recording of interviews only | Yes / No |
| (b) The recording of interviews and the compilation of summary sheets | Yes / No |
| (c) The recording of interviews and the compilation of indexes | Yes / No |
| (d) The recording of interviews and the production of transcripts | Yes / No |
| (e) A policy or code of ethics | Yes / No |
| (f) The formal documentation of interviews (including release forms, copyright agreements, etc) | Yes / No |
| (g) Allowing interviewees to listen to tapes after interviews and/or to read transcripts | Yes / No |
| (h) Giving copies of tapes and or/transcripts to interviewees | Yes / No |
| (i) Lodging copies of interviews with an established archive? | Yes / No |
- (ii) Have your procedures changed over time? Yes / No (Please summarise how)

8. How many people are involved in your oral history project? (Please specify)
- (a) Voluntarily
 - (b) As paid employment
 - (c) Part-time
 - (d) Full-time
 - (e) One-off
9. How many interviews have you conducted? (Please specify)
- (a) In the first year of your project
 - (b) This year
 - (c) In total
10. (i) Have any attempts been made to attract new workers or volunteers to your project?
(Please specify)
- (ii) How was this achieved?
- (iii) How successful has this been?

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES

11. Would you describe the ethnic background of the majority of your interviewees as: (Please circle a, b, etc.)
- (a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
 - (b) Anglo-Celtic
 - (c) Other European
 - (d) Asian
 - (e) Other? (Please specify)

12. (i) Who selects your interviewees?

(ii) How are interviewees selected?

(iii) Why were the interviewees selected?

(iv) Have your interviewers undertaken any of the following training schemes? (Please circle one or more of a, b, etc.)

(a) Oral history workshop (Please state provider)

(b) Conference attendance

(c) University history degree

(d) TAFE or WEA course

(e) Self-trained

(f) Other (Please specify)

(g) No training

COLLECTION DETAILS

13. Is the objective of your oral history project to investigate one or more of the following: (please circle one or more of a, b, etc)

(a) Localities/places (including work places)

(b) Themes (e.g. work, leisure, family, transport, ethnicity)

(c) Local identities

(d) 'Ordinary' lives

(e) Events

(f) Other? (Please specify)

14. Using a scale of 1 to 6 (where 1 is most important and 6 is least important) indicate the extent to which your project relates to the following environments:

(a) The natural 1 2 3 4 5 6

(b) The historic environment 1 2 3 4 5 6

(c) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environments 1 2 3 4 5 6

15. Is your collection housed: (Please circle)

- (a) In a library
- (b) In an archive
- (c) In a community facility
- (d) In a private residence
- (e) Other? (Please specify)

USAGE

16. Is your collection ever used for any of the following purposes? (Please circle a, b, etc.)

- (a) Heritage reports or studies
- (b) Conservation plans
- (c) Conservation or restoration of sites or places
- (d) Local history (including schools, museums, parks, memorial, monuments, natural environment, heritage buildings, social and sporting facilities)

17. Is your collection open to researchers? Yes / No

18. How often is the collection accessed by others? (Please circle a, b, etc.)

- (a) 1–5 times per year
- (b) 6–10 times per year
- (c) 11–15 times per year
- (d) Other (Please specify)

RESOURCES

19. Have you had assistance from any of the following? (Please circle a, b, etc.)

- (a) Federal Government
- (b) State government
- (c) Local government
- (d) Private industry
- (e) Service organisations or charities
- (f) Other (Please specify)
- (g) None of the above

20. (i) What is the budget for the project? (Please specify)

(ii) Is this an annual budget or a one-off budget? (Please specify)

PRESSURES

21. Which of the following items do you think pose significant problems for oral history today?
Please rank each item from 1 to 6 (where 1 is most important and 6 is least important),

- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (a) An aging population | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (b) Lack of human resources | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (c) Lack of material support | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (d) Lack of interest | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (e) Large demands on the collection | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (f) Lack of information skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (g) Access to the collections | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (h) Other (Please specify) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

CHANGES

22. Would you agree or disagree (1 is strongly agree and 6 is strongly disagree) that over the last 10 years:

- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (a) That access to training has improved | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (b) That people have become more aware of the potential for oral history in heritage related work | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (c) That your collection has been used increasingly in heritage studies | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| (d) That places/localities have become an increasingly important aspect of your interviews? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

SOCIAL VALUE

23. Briefly, what value do you think your project gives to the community in general?

24. Do you think that oral history should play a greater role in determining or expressing the heritage significance of places and localities?

Yes / No

25. Use a scale of 1 to 6 (1 being most significant and 6 being least significant) to indicate what impact you think your project has had on the following groups of opinion.

- (a) Local attitudes to heritage 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (b) Professional heritage practitioners 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (c) Local media 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (d) Local government attitudes to heritage and the environment 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (e) School education programs 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (f) Local groups (e.g. historical societies, National Trust branches, conservation groups) 1 2 3 4 5 6
- (g) Government agencies (e.g. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Commission, state heritage agencies) 1 2 3 4 5 6

THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ASSISTANCE

Appendix 2: Institutions surveyed and interviewed

Recognising that the pilot survey of the use of oral history in heritage practice in Australia had an extremely limited time for its execution, the authors, in consultation with the State of the Environment Natural and Cultural Heritage Reference Group, devised a select list of key bodies to undertake this initial pilot. The organisations and institutions surveyed are shown in the first list. The second list at the end of this appendix shows organisations and institutions that were interviewed.

2.1 Organisations and institutions surveyed

Universities

University of New South Wales, Oral History Project
Queensland University of Technology
University of Western Australia
Monash University, Centre for Gippsland Studies
Charles Sturt University
Northern Territory University
James Cook University, Townsville,

Libraries

State Library of New South Wales
State Library of South Australia
State Library of Western Australia
State Library of Queensland
State Library of Tasmania
State Library of Northern Territory
National Library of Australia
New South Wales: Blue Mountains Library
New South Wales: Liverpool Regional Library
New South Wales: Marrickville Library
New South Wales: Newcastle Regional Library
New South Wales: Stanton Library, North Sydney
South Australia: Public Libraries Department, Local History officer

Historical and heritage organisations

Northern Territory

Northern Territory Historical Society
Northern Territory Genealogical Society
Katherine Historical Society
National Trust

New South Wales

Royal Australian Historical Society
Fairfield Regional Heritage Centre
Blacktown and District Historical Society
City of Liverpool and District Historical Society
Toongabbie and District Historical Society
Richmond River Historical Society
Lake Macquarie and District Historical Society
Nepean and District Historical Society
Bankstown Historical Society
Beecroft–Cheltenham Historical Society
Bega Valley Historical Society
Bellingen Valley Historical Society
Canterbury Historical Society
Hornsby Historical Society
Balmain Historical Society
Armidale and District Historical Society
Bourke Historical Society
Forbes and District Historical Society
Gosford and District Historical Society

Queensland

Queensland Historical Society
Queensland Family History Society
Queensland Genealogical Society
Banana Shire Historical Society
Bundaberg and District Historical Society
Caboolture Historical Society
Dawson Folk Museum
Texas Historical Society

South Australia

Burnside Historical Society
East Torrens Historical Society
Karoonda and District Historical Society
Marree Historical Society
Burra Historical Society
Folk Federation of South Australia
Fort Granville Historical Society
Kapunda Historical Society
Port Dock Station Railway Museum
South Australian Gas Company Historical Society
Wudina–Le Hunt Historical Society

Tasmania

Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies
Bothwell Historical Society
Channel History and Folk Museum Association
Furneaux Historical Research Association
Ulverstone Historical Society
National Trust
St. Helens History Room Inc.
Tasmanian Aboriginal Genealogy and History
Association

Victoria

Royal Victorian Historical Society
Ararat and District Historical Society
Avoca and District Historical Society
Brighton Historical Society
Benga Oral History Society
East Gippsland Historical Society
Geelong Historical Society
Richmond and Burnley Historical Society

Western Australia

Royal Western Australian Historical Society
Augusta Historical Society
Fremantle Historical Society

Museums

National Museum of Australia
Powerhouse Museum (New South Wales)
Newcastle Regional Museum
State Museum of Victoria
Museum of Queensland (Aboriginal History Unit)
Museum of Queensland (Social History)
Fremantle Gaol Complex
Museum of Western Australia

Government departments

Australian Broadcasting Commission, Social
History Unit
Australian War Memorial
Department of Public Works (New South Wales)
Sydney Water Board (New South Wales)
The Rocks Heritage Centre New South Wales
Barngarla Aboriginal Consultative Council (SA)
Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural
Resources, Historic Places Branch
Broken Hill City Council
Heritage Council (Queensland)

2.2 Organisations and institutions interviewed

As can be seen from Appendix 1, the questionnaire was designed to investigate the use of oral history in heritage related work. It was not designed to assay the state of oral history in Australia in a more general sense. The first question therefore eliminated many of the organisations and institutions which do undertake oral history projects and house oral history collections in Australia. As a gauge of the use of oral history records in heritage conservation work though, the proportion of organisations and institutions thus eliminated is of significance. However, readers wishing less specific information about the practice of oral history in Australia are directed to the National Library of Australia's forthcoming *Towards federation 2001: Directory of oral history and folklore collections in Australia*.

Of the targeted group who were able to answer the questionnaire within the available time, the following undertook projects or housed relevant oral history material.

Barnarla Aboriginal Consultative Council (SA)	National Library, Oral History Section (ACT)
Australian Broadcasting Commission Radio, Social History Unit	North Sydney Council (NSW)
Benga Oral History Centre, Heritage Hill, Dandenong (Vic)	Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston (Tas)
Blacktown and District Historical Society (NSW)	Queensland Museum, Social History Unit (Qld)
Broken Hill City Council (NSW)	St. Helens History Room Inc. (Tas)
Charles Sturt University, School of Art and Cultural Heritage (NSW)	State Library of South Australia, Sommerville Oral History Collection (SA)
City of Belmont Historical Society (Vic)	State Museum of Victoria (Vic)
Fairfield Regional Heritage Centre (NSW)	University of New South Wales, Oral History Project
Fremantle Prison Heritage Precinct (WA)	University of Western Australia, Centre for Western Australian History (WA)
Blue Mountains City Library (NSW)	
James Cook University, North Queensland Oral History Project (Qld)	Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Historic Places (Vic)