



**NATIONAL FILM
AND SOUND ARCHIVE
OF AUSTRALIA**

National Film and Sound Archive's Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's *Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region*

The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) tells the national story by collecting, preserving and sharing audiovisual media, the cultural experience platforms of our time.

The Australian public entrusts these responsibilities to us through the *National Film and Sound Archive of Australia Act 2008* (NFSA Act).

Our collection includes more than 4 million items, and not only video and audio recordings, but also contextual materials such as costumes, scripts, props, photographs and promotional materials. It is a diverse, dynamic and often surprising repository. As well as preserving these items for future generations, our curators continue to grow the collection ensuring it provides an unbroken record of life in Australia, and of Australian creativity.

The NFSA's collection also holds materials created in and by the people of the Pacific. This material has arrived with the NFSA through makers, producers, government programs and private collections. This collection material dates back to the 1930s and includes documentaries, home movies, news and current affairs, feature films, music and radio broadcasts.

NFSA's History of Involvement with the Pacific Islands

The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) has a long history of providing advice, support and training to organisations that hold and manage audiovisual collections in the Pacific. Audiovisual collections are vital tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Pacific region. The preservation, access and use of film, television, recorded music, oral history, social media and web content contribute to social cohesion and an understanding of a unique national story. However, in the tropical climates of the Pacific Islands, and increasing climate instability, audiovisual items are highly susceptible to chemical deterioration and attack by biological factors, such as mould, leading to the potential complete loss of these important cultural records and artefacts.

In 2014/15, the NFSA surveyed the preservation needs and challenges of audiovisual collecting agencies. This survey highlighted the significant challenges in maintaining audiovisual collections in Pacific climates, including poor storage facilities, limited power and HVAC (heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems) systems, limited AV viewing and digitisation equipment, underinvestment in consistent staffing and limited opportunities for training and career development. The survey and site review were undertaken in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, New Caledonia and Vanuatu, with contact made with Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands. The key findings included limited training activities and budget to support training, limited disaster planning for both physical and digital collection materials, and limited policies and procedures in place to support small teams working to preserve significant collections.

There is little evidence that these challenges have been comprehensively addressed and remediated in the last 10 years, particularly when the impact of Covid pandemic border and institutional closures are considered. Major weather events such as Cyclone Pam in 2015 and Tonga's volcanic eruption in 2022 impact on audiovisual collections through disruptions to power, changes in temperature and humidity and prioritisation of investment in repairs to basic infrastructure. Civil unrest also threatens collections, with the most recent example being the damage to government buildings in New Caledonia, placing cultural collections under immediate threat.

The NFSA has sought grant funding for activities in the Pacific, and in 2020 received International Cultural Diplomacy Arts Fund support to undertake collection management, conservation and digitisation support activities across a number of countries. Due to the impact of Covid pandemic closures the project resolved to focus on one country and one organisation, the National Film Institute in Papua New Guinea, which has allowed for a co-design of the training, practical advice and support and digitisation of selected collection material. A short case study of our work with the NFI is presented below.

The NFSA is a founding member of the SouthEast Asia Pacific AudioVisual Archiving Association (SEAPAVAA) and has utilised SEAPAVAA as a key mechanism for understanding the work of audiovisual archives in the Pacific. At an ASEAN funded training program held in 1995 the participants pursued the idea of a regional association to address common issues and concerns relating to the collection, preservation and provision of access to the audiovisual heritage of member countries. SEAPAVAA is committed to supporting Pacific members and plans to host the 2025 annual conference in Fiji as part of a program of post-Covid pandemic reconnection with Pacific audiovisual organisations.

The NFSA is also a long-term supporter and contributor to the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council of Archives (PARBICA), and regularly presents at conferences and responds to requests for information and assistance from members. It is hoped the 2025 SEAPAVAA conference will be held in collaboration with the PARBICA annual conference, diversifying the network of members and contributing to information exchange.

Audiovisual collections and climate change

Across the Asia-Pacific region, tangible and intangible heritage is being affected by climate change. Fire, water, physical forces, pests, extremes in relative humidity and temperature, pollutants, and dissociation threaten collections. Cataclysmic events bring all disaster elements mentioned above together in one devastating incident (Sloggett and Scott 2022). Audio, video and film materials are particularly susceptible to damage and loss. The increased frequency and severity of weather events, such as Cyclone Pam in 2015, require staff 'safeguards' of heritage to maintain and upskill in disaster preparedness and recovery. Alongside these climate challenges, universal museum environmental standards introduced in the twentieth century are global north specific, resulting in standards that are unsuitable in our region.

For smaller collections, adopting a sustainable collections approach is important to ensure that resources are most effectively deployed and that collection preservation outcomes aim to maximise benefits for existing and potential present and future stakeholders. This requires an understanding of current operational and social dynamics and interest in emerging issues and maturing trends that affect audiovisual preservation practices. As highlighted throughout this submission, the lack of collection care and preservation resources across the Pacific limits an institution's ability to do the technical work and maintain the longevity of their collections in hot and humid climates.

To address these issues of sustainability in 'challenge led' heritage contexts in the tropics several collaborative bodies have been established; some examples include, the [Asia Pacific Tropical Climate Conservation Art Research Network](#) (APTCCARN) in 2008 and [SouthEast Asia-Pacific AudioVisual Archive Association](#) (SEAPAVAA) in 1996. Both these networks of engaged heritage workers undertake regionally relevant projects, disseminate outcomes and research, and environmental data. As asserted by Dr Nicole Tse of The University of Melbourne, approaches need to be 'inclusive, building pluralistic knowledge across the four agency(ies) of conservation of objects, people, place and time' (2018).

As audiovisual archives across our region rise to the challenges of climate-change, there is a timely and increased need for collaboration and knowledge exchange. Opportunities to engage in dialogue about why, what it means and how to maintain and care for material culture in the tropical global south is critical. Conservation decision-making relies on tools and evidence of material changes, an understanding of local contexts and the establishment of acceptable levels of change. There is huge potential to work across organisations and across the Asia-Pacific region in professional and non-professional contexts. Such cultural exchanges need support in the small and long term - supporting sustainable collections is contributing knowledge and skills generated through research and practice to help inform strategies for present and future access to collections. It appropriately takes time and effort to build trusting working relationships, share information and create new knowledge together.

However, the gains from these collaborative relationships are significant, the NFI/NFSA case study is an exemplar. These co-designed projects optimise knowledge generation, cultural understanding and value and skill transmission whilst striving to reduce adverse effects on the environment and cultural material assets (Lelyveld 2019).

Deadline 2025

Deadline 2025 refers to the consensus among audiovisual archives internationally that we will not be able to support large-scale digitisation of magnetic media in the very near future. All tape-based formats created in the 20th century are now obsolete, and tape that is not digitised by 2025 will in most cases be lost forever. This creates a deadline, and a dilemma, for those entrusted with the care of these precious memories. There have been some targeted digitisation projects supported by Australia and New Zealand in recent years to increase digitisation rates in the Pacific, however it is likely that tens of thousands of hours of tape remain un-digitised and therefore are not preserved for the future. This loss is most likely to impact important moments recorded for news and current affairs, locally produced TV series and many different audio formats including radio broadcasts.

The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives in collaboration with UNESCO undertook a comprehensive survey of magnetic tape preservation capacity in 2020. Their report noted that one significant challenge was simply around making contact with Pacific archives and only five responses from Pacific nations were received (excluding Australia and New Zealand). These results highlight both the lack of current and detailed information about the state of audiovisual collections in the Pacific, and that magnetic media collections in this region are at risk of significant and permanent loss.

Of primary importance is action to commence or up-scale digitisation activities in the Pacific. An example of an adaptable and mobile digitisation system was developed by Nga Taonga Sound and Vision in New Zealand. The *Rokirokitia* project provided 50 mobile digitisation field kits which enabled and empowered small and community-based organisations to digitise video and audio collection items between 2021 and 2023. This project provides a model of support that could be rolled out across the Pacific Islands.

Digitisation, digital preservation and digital resilience

A key factor in the preservation and accessibility of audiovisual collections is their digitisation and digital preservation. Digitisation is, at times, a complex activity requiring specialist equipment, trained staff and a digital infrastructure to manage the safe data storage of collection materials.

Of increasing importance are digital preservation practices, systems and data storage infrastructure, which ensure digitised material or born digital audiovisual materials are held securely and without degradation for the long term. Digital files are fragile, just like film and tape. Their longevity and accessibility is threatened by quick obsolescence of digital formats, threats to storage infrastructure and the need for regular migration.

Many Pacific Island libraries, archives and museums have limited access to digitisation equipment and secure data storage. SEAPAVAA surveyed members in 2023 regarding impacts of the Covid pandemic to seek information about the availability of collections online. The Kiribati National Library's response noted that none of their collection was available online and that data was being held on local computers with minimal information technology support and maintenance. This response is consistent with approaches to SEAPAVAA seeking support for digitisation and IT infrastructure.

Proposals for the development of 'data embassies' have been discussed within archival communities of practice in recent years. At its core a data embassy would provide a safe haven for digitized and born digital archival material that is in danger of loss in its local environment. Whilst this approach has its limitations, the concept that organisations such as the NFSA, with well-managed, maintained and secure data storage, could provide a higher level of protection of invaluable heritage assets is worthy of further exploration.

Case Study - The NFSA and the NFI

The NFSA has been in a partnership with the National Film Institute (NFI), Papua New Guinea (PNG) for the past four years as part of the Pacific Engagement Project supported through the Australian Government's International Cultural Diplomacy Arts Fund (ICDAF).

In 2021-22 the NFSA spent several months virtually assessing the NFI film collection to determine suitability for conservation and digitisation. A selection of high priority at-risk NFI films were transported to the NFSA, Canberra for conservation treatment. Digitisation of these highly decomposing/damaged films was successfully completed using the NFSA's specialised equipment. In most instances the NFSA held better copies of these films in its collection, both in terms of condition and technical components, so those versions were used during the digitisation process to achieve the best possible outcome.

One of the films digitised with preservation material from the NFSA collection was *Tukana* (1984), considered one of PNG's most significant feature films. The NFSA is currently in discussions with the NFI to undertake

a digital restoration of this film as part of its *NFSA Restores* program for PNG's 50th Anniversary celebrations in 2025.

The NFSA is the custodian of significant audiovisual material relating to PNG and we will continue to work with NFI in identifying this material, the communities they belong to, and digitally repatriating the content.

A key component of this partnership has included capacity building for the NFI through training and skills development. NFI staff visited the NFSA in 2023 and undertook a detailed training program and as a follow up we produced training videos which the NFI are using onsite to train their staff. These videos will form the basis of a new resource that can be repurposed for use by other Pacific audiovisual archives and potentially remote First Nations media and cultural organisations. NFI staff returned in 2024 to undertake more training and research into the NFSA collection. NFI staff have also built valuable additional networks through participation in national and international conferences.

The NFSA delivered a range of archival packaging and supplies to the NFI so they can test, treat and store their films in more suitable preventative preservation conditions.

A final important part of this co-designed partnership was to develop a way for the NFI to access their newly digitised films onsite as they currently do not have any equipment or facilities. The NFSA designed and built a Remote Digital Access System (RDAS) that will be transported and installed in Goroka at the NFI. This system also has the potential to be used by other Pacific audiovisual archives and remote First Nations communities to access audiovisual collection material.

Recommendations

1. That the Australian Government provides targeted funding opportunities to support audiovisual archiving projects such as the partnership with the National Film Institute, Papua New Guinea. These types of projects deliver meaningful and significant long-term benefits to Pacific audiovisual archives that result in their important cultural and historical audiovisual heritage being preserved and made accessible. Additional support is required to expand these projects to include not only capacity building so Pacific audiovisual archives can better preserve their own collections but to identify relevant material in the NFSA's collection that is suitable for digital repatriation.
2. That the Australian Government supports the GLAM sector in Australia at state and national levels to share information, provide training and to collaborate with Pacific audiovisual collections on managing the impacts of climate change in the tropical global south, including development of accessible and relevant collection management, conservation and digitisation guidelines suitable to the environments in which Pacific collections are located.
3. That consideration be given to targeted employment and training opportunities for Pacific Island audiovisual archive workers to develop capacity and contribute to long-term solutions being implemented at the local level.

4. That the Australian Government coordinates further exploration of the 'data embassy' concept and provision of data storage services to the Pacific, particularly in relation to culturally appropriate, secure and long-term storage of archival records.
5. That the Australian Government supports membership bodies such as SEAPAVAA, PARBICA and UNESCO's Memory of the World Documentary Heritage Group to grow and develop existing Pacific networks. For example, financial support for Pacific archivists to attend the SEAPAVAA 2025 conference, likely to be hosted by Fiji, would offer the opportunity for substantial skills and information sharing.
6. That the Australian Government supports the National Collecting Institutions to collectively leverage their specialist knowledge across collection management, conservation, digitisation, digital preservation, access and curatorial practice to deliver training in the Pacific, and to host interns, trainees or workers in Australia.