

Questions for external data-sharing parties



What Traditional Owner organisations should ask when approached to take part in a data collection or research projects

Traditional Owner organisations are often approached by external parties to participate in research or data collection projects (including monitoring projects). However, these external groups don't always approach in ways that address Traditional Owners' priorities or respect Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Traditional Owner organisations are best placed to assess whether a project aligns with and upholds their rights, values, and interests. The set of questions below are designed to support Traditional Owners to make these assessments.

General questions about the project

Project purpose, benefit and outputs

Why it matters:

It is important that you know about the purpose of the project and its intended outcomes. External parties often design their projects without the input of Traditional Owners, which means that they are unlikely to represent your priorities, rights, values and interests.

Understanding why the project is being done and who it benefits helps ensure all work done meets Traditional Owner priorities, not just the interests of the external parties. Projects should contribute to caring for Country, strengthening culture, and supporting community wellbeing.

The questions below will require external parties consider and present how their research benefits your Traditional Owner group/s and your Country.

Questions to ask:

- What is the purpose of this project?
 - What are the major research questions?
 - Is this part of a larger research project?
 - What will be the outcome of this research project?
 - What kinds of outputs will the research produce, e.g. academic publications, community-facing products such as information sheets or education campaigns, summarised booklets of project and findings, etc.?
- How will it benefit Traditional Owners, our community, and our Country (now and into the future)?
- What influence can Traditional Owners (and our organisation) have in the direction and outcomes of the research?

- What risks might this project create for our organisation, our Traditional Owners/community, and our Country. How will you mitigate these risks and others that we might identify?

Alignment with Traditional Owner and community priorities

Why it matters:

External projects should fit within and support your existing plans and governance frameworks. Alignment ensures that the project and the data that is collected supports your community's priorities and decision-making.

This also ensures that external parties are aware of your community's priorities and work towards supporting them.

Questions to ask:

- How does this project align with our existing plans and strategic direction, e.g. Healthy Country Plan, IPA Plan, Sea Country Plan, Strategic Plan, Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management Plan, governance priorities etc.?
- How have you considered our cultural protocols, community priorities, or decision-making processes?
- Is there scope for us to influence the research questions, or add additional questions that we would like to know about?

Consent and governance

Why it matters:

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes and strong governance ensure decisions about data are made by those with cultural authority and must happen continuously throughout the project, not just at the beginning. They also build trust and accountability between partners.

If your community has documented their cultural protocols and governance practices, such as working through an Elders Council for cultural authority for consent, then it is your responsibility to inform them and provide guidance that allows them to follow appropriate processes.

Questions to ask:

- How will you ensure free, prior, and informed consent at both organisational, community and individual levels?
- Are you aware of our cultural protocols and governance structures/practices related to data collection and research partnerships?
- How will Traditional Owner governance structures (Boards, Elders Councils, cultural authority groups) be involved in decisions about the project and be kept up to date on progress?
- How will this project address issues of ICIP and co-authorship of the report for equity, self-determination and/or ownership of the outcomes of the project, for now and in the future?
- Who will be our main point of contact?

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Local involvement capacity building

Why it matters:

True partnerships build skills, create opportunities, and share benefits. Projects should strengthen local capacity, not extract information. They should include our local community members at all stages and benefits need to be shared.

Questions to ask:

- Will there be co-design, co-development and co-delivery of the project to include Traditional Owners in the project as a joint venture?
- How will our people be involved, e.g. employment, training, co-research roles?
- What resources, skills, or technology will stay in the community after the project ends?
- Will there be opportunities for joint authorship or recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual property?

Ethics and accountability

Why it matters:

Ethical and moral oversight and clear accountability ensures that community interests and cultural safety are respected in project design, delivery and legacy. Indigenous-led ethics bodies and frameworks guide how researchers should engage with Indigenous groups and individuals. Knowing whether a researcher or external party has engaged with these bodies and frameworks (or sought their approval) can help to ensure their project has considered specific ethics requirements related to working with Indigenous communities and individuals.

Copies of the project's ethics application, approval and progress reports should be shared with your community.

Questions to ask:

- Has the project been reviewed by an Indigenous ethics body (e.g. AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee) for ethics approval with a community representative as a Principle or Assistant Researcher?
- What happens if the agreement is breached by either party? Who do we speak to?
- How will you report back progress and findings to the community, and how often?
- Do we get a copy of the project's ethics and progress reports?

Questions focussed on data

Data ownership and control

Why it matters:

Data about Country, culture and people is part of Traditional Owners' knowledge systems and identity. Clarifying ownership and control from the start of projects protects Indigenous Data Sovereignty and ensures information isn't used or shared without permission. This should be set out in the FPIC form that should be signed by the community representative or a separate agreement put in place outlining use, conditions, and benefits for both parties.

Questions to ask:

- Who will own the data collected, and how will ownership be recognised?
- Who will have the authority to decide how the data is collected, used, stored, or shared?
- Will we have the right to stop the project or withdraw our data if we choose?

Access and storage

Why it matters:

Knowing where your data is stored, who can access it, and how it will be secured helps protect against misuse or loss of sensitive information. Data should be accessible to the community and stored safely under Indigenous Governance arrangements.

If sensitive information is being captured, you may seek specific assurances about how this information will be secured and the conditions under which it may be accessed.

Questions to ask:

- Where will the data be stored (e.g. servers, databases, cloud systems)?
- Who will be able to access it and view, use or share the data?
- Will the data be kept in Australia or overseas? Where, and with whom?
- How do we get full access to the raw data, not just the analysed results?
- How long will the data be stored?
- What security measures are in place to protect culturally sensitive or gender-specific information?

Questions for external data-sharing parties



Data use and data sharing

Why it matters:

Once data is shared, it can be difficult to control how it is used. Setting clear rules and review processes ensures data isn't shared or published without Traditional Owner approval and/or participation as co-presenters if necessary. Traditional Owners must also understand 'how' the data is planned to be used (e.g. to contribute to what kinds of debates, to tell what kind of story, support what kind of argument etc.).

Questions to ask:

- How will the data be used?
- Who else will be able to access the data (government, industry, researchers, public) and will the community be informed about the request for data and by whom?
- How will you ensure it is not shared without our permission and that no changes are allowed?
- What processes are in place for us to review and approve any publications, reports, or public outputs before release?

Cultural protocols and culturally sensitive information

Why it matters:

Some knowledge is sacred or restricted, and sharing it without proper authority can cause harm. Respecting cultural protocols ensures the project upholds cultural integrity and responsibility to Country and its people.

Questions to ask:

- How will the project respect restricted knowledge (e.g. men's/women's business, sacred sites, totemic species)?
- Who decides what information can be made public and what must remain confidential?
- Will the project employ cultural monitors or advisors from our organisation to oversee the data and the project in general?

Exit and long-term data legacy

Why it matters:

Data has a life beyond the project. Clear exit and legacy arrangements protect your Traditional Owner rights over long-term use, access, storage, and future access.

It is usual practice and sometimes outlined in agreements, that data should be kept for at least 7 years, and the community needs to know if they are able to have their complete data set returned to them after that period.

Questions to ask:

- What happens to the data when the project ends?
- Will there be a plan for long-term storage and community access?
- How will future use of the data be managed, especially if new questions arise that weren't covered in the original project and or agreement?

Questions for external data-sharing parties



Checklist for external research/data collection parties

Present this checklist to external parties when they approach you to take part in a research or data collection project. Use the answers provided to guide discussions about whether you choose to take part in the research or data collection project.

Ensuring that you are comfortable with each of the answers will help you to decide if this is the right research or data collection project for your community and that your rights, data and cultural knowledge are at the front of the thinking and are always respected.

Theme	Question	Response
Purpose and benefits	What is the purpose of this project?	
	What are the major research questions?	
	Is this part of a larger research project?	
	What is the outcome of this research project?	
	What kinds of outputs will the research produce (e.g. academic publications, community-facing products such as information sheets or education campaigns, summarised booklets of project and findings, etc...?)	
	How will it benefit our people, Country, and future generations?	
	What influence do the Traditional Owners, our community, and our Country have over the research (now and into the future)?	
	What risks might it bring, and how will these be managed?	
	Alignment with Traditional Owners and community priorities	
	How does this project align with our existing plans and strategic direction (e.g. Healthy Country Plan, IPA Plan, Sea Country Plan, Strategic Plan, Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management Plan, governance priorities etc.)?	
	How have you considered our cultural protocols, community priorities, or decision-making processes?	
	Can we influence the research questions, or add new questions to align with our priorities?	
Data Ownership and Control	Who will own the data collected, and how will ownership be recognised?	
	Who will have the authority to decide how the data is collected, used, stored, or shared?	
	Will we have the right to stop the project or withdraw our data if we choose?	
Consent and Governance	How will you ensure, free, prior and informed consent at both organisational, community and individual levels?	
	Are you aware of our cultural protocols and governance structures/ practices related to data collection and research partnerships?	
	How will Traditional Owner governance structures (Boards, Elders Councils, cultural authority groups) be involved in decisions about the project?	
	How will this project address issues of ICIP and co-authorship of the report of equity, self-determination and/or ownership of the outcomes of the project for now and in the future?	
	Who will be our main point of contact?	

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Theme	Question	Response
Data Access and Storage	Where will the data be stored (e.g. servers, databases, cloud systems)?	
	Who will be able to access it and view, use or share the data?	
	Will the data be kept in Australia or overseas? Where, and with whom?	
	How do we get full access to the raw data, not just the analysed results?	
	How long will the data be stored?	
	What security measures are in place to protect culturally sensitive or gender-specific information?	
Data Use and Sharing	How will the data be used?	
	Who else will be able to access the data (government, industry, researchers, public) and will the community be informed about the request for data and by whom?	
	How will you ensure it is not shared without our permission and that no changes are allowed?	
	What processes are in place for us to review and approve any publications, reports, or public outputs before release?	
Cultural Protocols	How will the project respect restricted knowledge (e.g. men's/ women's business, sacred sites, totemic species)?	
	Who decides what information can be made public and what must remain confidential?	
	Will the project employ cultural monitors or advisors from our organisation to oversee the data and the project in general?	
Local Involvement capacity building	Will there be a co-design, co-development and co-delivery of the project to include Traditional Owners in the project as a joint venture?	
	How will our people be involved (employment, training, co-research roles)?	
	What resources, skills, or technology will stay in the community after the project ends?	
	Will there be opportunities for joint authorship or recognition of Indigenous intellectual property?	
Ethics and Accountability	Has the project been reviewed by an Indigenous ethics body (e.g. AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee) for ethics approval with a community representative as a Principle or Assistant Researcher?	
	What happens if the agreement is breached by either party? Who do we speak to?	
	How will you report back progress and findings to the community, and how often?	
	Do we get a copy of the project's ethics and progress reports?	
Exit and Legacy	What happens to the data when the project ends?	
	Will there be a plan for long-term storage and community access?	
	How will future use of the data be managed, especially if new questions arise that weren't covered in the original project and or agreement?	