LAAL
THE LIVING ARCHIVE
OF ABORIGINAL
LANGUAGES

Collaboration between university academics, project staff and Charles Darwin University (CDU) Library staff has resulted in the development of an innovative online resource to sustain and preserve Aboriginal languages and cultures. *JAYSHREE MAMTORA, NEIL GODFREY and CATHERINE BOW tell us more.*

During the era of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, when Aboriginal children were given the opportunity to learn to read and write in their own language before transitioning to English literacy, thousands of books in dozens of Aboriginal languages were created for use in these remote schools. Many of these books have been lost or damaged, and there was no central point of access for this rich heritage of resources.
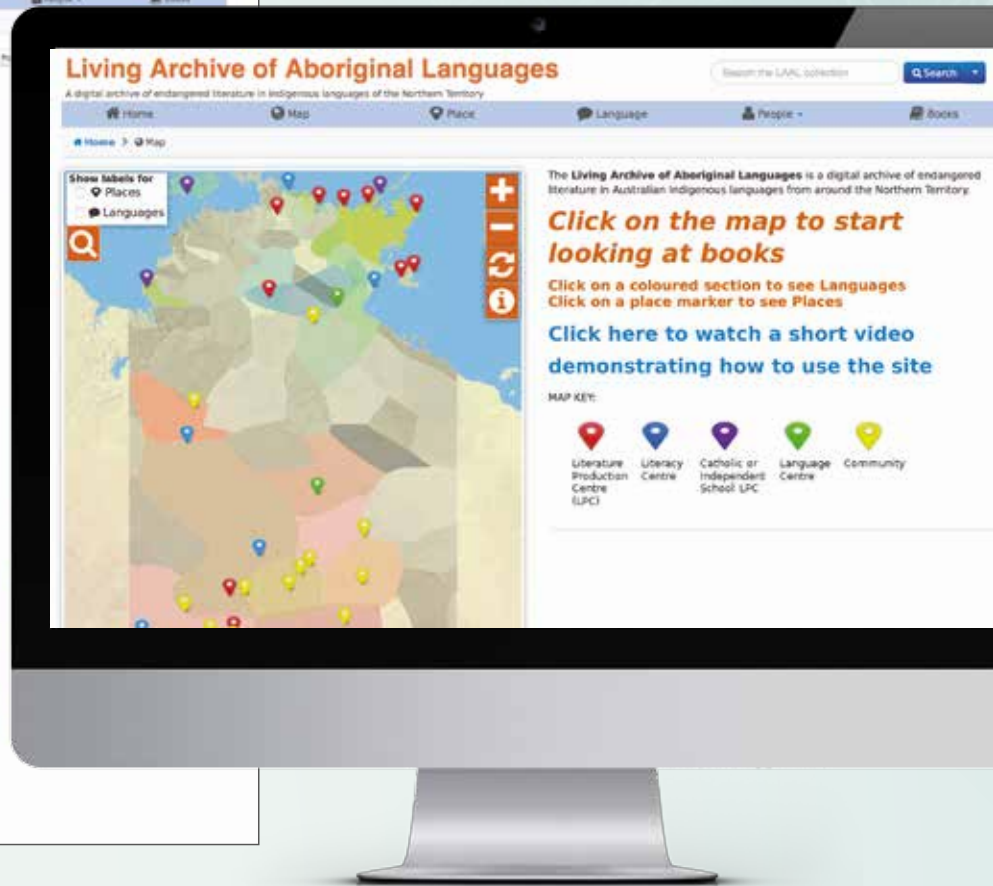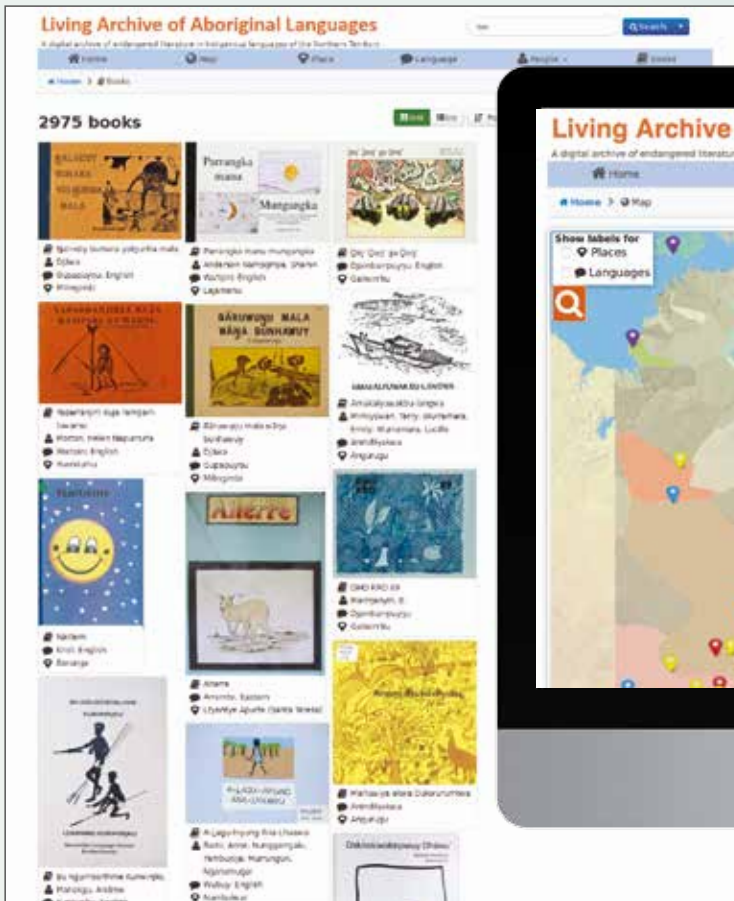
CDU Library has partnered with a group of academics concerned about the fate of these precious materials and created the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages (cdu.edu.au/laal). This online repository, established in 2012, currently contains around 3,000 items in 50 different Aboriginal languages, including scanned PDFs and searchable text files.

The archive was originally funded by the Australian Research Council as a research facility to enable academics to access these materials. The research team was keen to make the language materials equally accessible to the Indigenous communities that originally produced them. Making it accessible for people who may not have advanced text or computer literacy skills was a high priority, and it made this archive very different from those designed specifically for researchers. A highly visual interface was developed that focuses on images, such as the interactive map and thumbnail images of book covers to allow users to navigate the site without needing to type or read much text. A video screencast on the home page demonstrates the use of the Living Archive, an accompanying project site that gives background and topical information about the project and related activities, and there is a mobile app and a social media presence to encourage engagement with the project and resources.

The research team collaborated with CDU Library staff to focus on the technical arrangements for making the archive accessible. The Library was responsible for the repository, web application and digitisation program, contributing their expertise in metadata and resource organisation and management in relation to creating, storing, preserving and sharing the type of materials included. Using CDU's institutional repository ensures sustainability of the project beyond the immediate funding cycles, and enables harvesting by OAI-PMH (Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting) and OLAC (the Open Language Archives Community) for wider discoverability and access.

The archive contains stories of traditional and contemporary life, including creation stories, children's picture books, pre- and post-contact histories, books about the environment, hunting, bush medicines, ghost stories, stories of memorable events, memoirs, conception stories, cautionary tales, as well as primers and readers for language instruction. They reflect a fascinating combination of traditional knowledge and Western education systems, with a range of beautiful illustrations mostly by local artists.

The archive is a useful source of information for anyone interested in exploring Indigenous knowledge, languages and cultures, as it provides a rich body of literature largely written by Indigenous people for their own community settings. These materials are also useful for schools wishing to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge into all aspects of the Australian curriculum.

The Living Archive invites collaboration between users and the original owners and creators of the materials. The goal is more than simple preservation of a body of endangered literature; it is a living body of knowledge that is relevant to all Australians.

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JAYSHREE MAMTORA, AFALIA (DCP)
Research Services Coordinator, Office of Library Services
Charles Darwin University
jayshree.mamtora@cdu.edu.au

NEIL GODFREY, AALIA
Digital Collections Coordinator, Office of Library Services
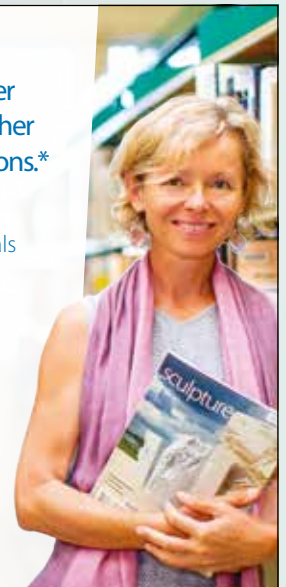Charles Darwin University
neil.godfrey@cdu.edu.au

CATHERINE BOW
Project Manager, Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages
Charles Darwin University
cathy.bow@cdu.edu.au