

Frequently asked questions

This section contains a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) – including those that have come up during information sessions at Aboriginal communities. Our aim is to listen closely to what families want to know, and to extend this list as more questions come up during future community visits. Some of these FAQs will also overlap with information provided in the participation information sheet you can find [here](#).

Key:

SAM = South Australian Museum

BAR = Board for Anthropological Research

ARC = Australian Research Council

1. What are the aims of the project?

We aim to generate a reference map of the genetic diversity of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander lineages across Australia. This map will allow family and community relationships to be reconstructed when oral or written records fail, and will be of major benefit to people who have been disconnected from family or community, such as the Stolen Generation. The map will help the repatriation of remains and artefacts that lack geographic origins. A major aim is to work with elders and communities to interpret the genetic patterns, and reconstruct a detailed history for Australia including community connections, migration routes, ceremonial gatherings, and how Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander people adapted to the impacts of past environmental changes.

2. What is the source of DNA used in the project?

Hair samples cut with scissors from living people who participated in the surveys performed by the BAR expeditions. A small lock of hair has been preserved in small paper envelopes since they were collected. The hair collection is safely stored in dedicated special storage rooms alongside other secret and sacred cultural items, with restricted access. We use a small portion of the hair sample in the scientific analysis.

3. How many hair samples are there?

There are currently ~5100 records of hair samples from Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander People in the collection database of the SAM. These hair samples were collected over the course of 52 BAR expeditions, which included 86 different communities and/or collection points, between 1925 and 1971 (although hair was not collected in all expeditions or communities). Several of these expeditions involved the anthropologists Joseph B. Birdsell and Norman B. Tindale.

4. Why were the samples collected?

The main purpose of the BAR was to secure funding and sponsor research into physical anthropology (physical measurements and observations of humans) with the intent of recording cultures and establishing the position of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the diversity of human groups around the world. Importantly, at this point in time, scientists across the world felt a great pressure to record as much pre-European contact data as possible. While the initial expeditions were primarily studies in physical anthropology, Norman Tindale introduced the importance of collecting social and cultural information to map the distribution of language groups.

5. What kind of data was collected?

Researchers collected a wealth of information. They made many measurements of body shape and also collected information about language, birthplace, tribal affinity, and family structure, which were documented on data cards and genealogies (i.e. family trees). In addition, there is extensive information about customs and everyday life in the form of photos, sound recordings, film, crayon drawings and school tests. Participants were also asked to donate some strands of hair as biological samples. Taken together, these records form an enormously important record and part of Aboriginal Australian heritage.

6. Did participants consent to have data collected, including hair samples?

Hair samples were collected long before our current concepts of informed consent existed. Participants were probably not told about the research aims, let alone issues of long-term storage, secondary use of samples, publication of results and other issues now seen as standard parts of the consent process. According to current concepts of consent, the process might have more closely resembled a form of 'implied' consent or 'compliance'. There is no evidence that people were forced to participate: many people weren't measured, and many of those who were didn't provide hair samples, suggesting that some freedom of choice existed. Nonetheless, in many collecting points, such as missions, Aboriginal people would have felt obliged to participate if the mission authorities directed them to. This is part of the reason why it is so important for us to obtain free, prior and informed consent from family members to use the hair samples for this project.

7. How many samples will you work on in total?

The success of the project will hinge on successful community engagement and good geographic coverage of all regions of Australia. To achieve this, our initial aim is to gain consent for an average of 20 hair samples from 20 communities, which equals 400 in total. The combined budgets of the ARC Linkage and Indigenous Discovery grants awarded to this project were designed to cover the costs for these 400 samples, including travel to communities and return visits to present and discuss the outcomes. However, we are keen to expand the project to more communities and families after our initial 3-year project if there is interest, and potentially this project could continue for the next decade.

8. How do you decide which communities to consult with for consent to use hair samples from their ancestors?

We aim to obtain consent to analyse an average of 20 samples per community, allowing for an average success rate of 50% for contacted families. To date, around 95% of contacted families have agreed to participate. We are targeting communities with 40 or more hair samples in the collection for community visits, however, this does not rule out communities with smaller numbers and we are keen to hear from everyone. We will work with existing family and community contacts and networks through the Archives unit at the South Australian Museum and other Museums to stimulate interest in the project.

Our aim is to achieve a representative and comprehensive geographical coverage, as better coverage means a better reference map, which in turn means greater power to reconstruct history and benefit communities.

9. How long does the project last?

The initial phase of the project will last three years, having started in late 2015, but it is clear that it could run for the next decade. We plan to expand on the project whilst it is running with the aim of establishing it as a permanent service

to Aboriginal Australians through help from additional funding bodies and corporate support. Please see FAQ22 if you would like to contribute to this initiative.

10. What is the timeline of the project? How long does it take to receive the results?

We're operating as a small team with a large number of tasks ranging from archival research, outreach and community contact to the scientific analysis and preparation and presentation of results to communities and the general public. We can work with no more than 2-3 communities at any one time. We estimate approximately a year (generally less) between gaining consent and returning the results to the community.

11. Who holds custody of the samples?

SAM is custodian of the BAR expedition collections. These collections are protected under National and State Heritage Acts. SAM recognises, however, that hair is a complex substance that has different meanings for different groups and individuals. We are currently working through what this collection means to these groups/individuals, and what it means to be custodians of such material. The Museum is committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People around Australia to ensure that there is an ongoing dialogue regarding our custodianship of this material that takes in account the cultural expectations of all stakeholders.

In addition to the hair samples, a wide array of physical, cultural and linguistic data was collected from individual participants and their families and communities. Individuals who wish to obtain a copy of their personal family data can fill in a [family history application form, here](#). Please note that copies of personal family data cannot be provided immediately due to limited staff resources.

12. Who owns the data?

The hair collection is securely stored at the South Australian Museum. With consent a small fraction of it will be used for genetic research and this sample will be processed and stored at the Australian Centre of Ancient DNA at the University of Adelaide. Here, the extracted DNA and the genetic data will be archived and stored safely for 15 years after the completion of this project in compliance with discipline standards under which the project was developed (e.g. AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies 2012, The Australian Government Policy on Indigenous Repatriation 2011, and NHMRC Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research 2003).

The DNA sequence data generated from the hair samples belongs to the hair sample donor and/or their descendants, i.e. family members, who provided the consent on behalf of the hair sample donor. You will receive this information during return visits (or via mail if you request this) but only you will be told of the result. Our team will archive an electronic copy of the sequence data in accordance with the agreement outlined above. By consenting to the project, you give us permission to use the (anonymous) genetic information to build the geographic map and reconstruct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. While the genetic results will be attached to a geographic source, there will be no names or information that could identify the hair donor.

13. How can I access this data?

If you have given consent, we will personally discuss the results with you during the return visit and provide you with a certificate of participation. If you cannot meet with us when we visit we will send you the certificate by mail or email and offer to talk to you on the phone to explain the results.

We will offer you access to your results on this website by creating your own private account, which will be linked to the particular hair sample number you have given consent for. This information cannot be accessed by anyone else. Please note that we are still developing this feature, so that it is not accessible at present.

14. Can I use my results for Native Title claims?

The genetic data only indicates the presence of specific genetic lineages in geographic areas in the past. It does not show what other genetic lineages were in the area at that time, or other times. Importantly, the genetic lineages are generally present across wide geographic areas, at different frequencies, and so cannot resolve local issues at which land claims operate. The genetic results are not produced at a level suitable for legal use.

15. Can I use my results to prove Aboriginality?

No, 'Aboriginality' cannot be defined genetically, but is based on acceptance and recognition by community. Someone's genetic lineage could confirm they have Aboriginal ancestry, but importantly it cannot disprove this since we measure only a tiny proportion of the genome (less than 1% of 1%!). Consequently, the results are not a record of identity for forensic, police or any other purpose.

16. Can the results exclude me from a particular Tribe/Country?

No, the genetic data can point to the most likely place of origin for each hair donor, but it cannot exclude the possibility that the donor came from a particular place. This is because the hair samples were only collected from a small proportion of the people that have lived in a particular region over time, which means we cannot reconstruct the complete history of each region.

17. Will the results be used for medical purposes?

No. This is an anthropological study only, and the samples will not be used other than outlined. No clinical data or information about medical history will be collected from you, and neither will the hair samples from your ancestors be used for any medically-related inquiry. Our interest is only in understanding the unique history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – the information will not be used to learn about any health problems you (or your family) may have.

18. How often will this website be updated?

We plan regular updates to the website. Ideally after the results have been returned to the respective community members in private, we will also share the bigger picture of Aboriginal Australia with you, reconstructed from the anonymised data.

19. Can I share the results with friends and others?

You can choose whom to share your results with. It's up to you.

20. What if I changed my mind after signing a consent form?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from active participation in this project at any time and to ask that data arising from

your participation will not be used in the research project. You may withdraw from the project at any time by completing the [“Withdrawal of Consent” form](#), or by contacting us [here](#).

21. What are the risks in participating?

There are no direct risks in consenting to use of a hair sample in the SAM collection. However, one potential indirect ‘risk’ is that new knowledge about family relationships may arise that differs to your known family history. This is why we return the results privately and directly to families and individuals. However, we have not yet come across an example that would differ from the family status that was recorded at the time when the hair samples were collected.

22. Irrespective of the hair samples that have been collected in the past I would also like to contribute to the study to increase the resolution of the genetic map. How can I do this?

We encourage this, but we will have to include this in a revised ethics application. It is also possible that one of your family members donated a hair sample at the time of the expeditions and in this case, we could simply use that sample if you consent.

If your community wasn’t part of a BAR expedition, your contribution could be useful and we ask you to get in contact. In this case, we would ask you to provide us with a swab or hair sample in order to perform this test for you. The process of information and consent will be identical with the process for the historic hair samples. However at this stage we have a small budget for such requests and can only include a limited number of additional participants.

23. How can I support the study?

We are very happy to receive further support, whether financial or logistical, to expand our study and to improve the genetic map of Australia. Please get in touch with us [directly](#) to discuss possible options of involvement and the next steps.