Recognition, Partnership and the RGSSA's Collections

The RGSSA has been considering how it can make a meaningful and lasting contribution to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Following careful review, Council has decided not to proceed with a formal Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Instead, the Society will pursue an approach suited to its character as a volunteer-led geographical and educational organisation—one centred on recognition, respectful partnership, our collections and practical additions to knowledge.

The proposal to enter the RAP process was first raised in 2024. A subcommittee of Councillors and RGSSA volunteers examined the framework and reported to Council. While recognising the value of RAPs in many organisations, the review concluded that a different path would better reflect the RGSSA's scale, resources and particular strengths. This decision is not a retreat from engagement. It is an opportunity to develop initiatives grounded in geography, education and collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

The Society's collections give it both an opportunity and a responsibility in this area. One major legacy comprises manuscripts, publications, maps, images and artefacts associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century exploring expeditions. These materials record encounters with Aboriginal peoples, particularly in Central Australia, and may offer valuable evidence about Country, language, culture and the geographical knowledge that made travel through unfamiliar environments possible.

The York Gate Library provides a second, internationally significant resource. Its geographical, exploration and travel literature documents early European contacts with Indigenous peoples in many parts of the world. Some accounts may preserve information about communities, cultural practices and encounters that is not widely known today. The collections also contain material relevant to descendants of other groups whose place in Australian history has often been overlooked, including Afghan cameleers, Chinese miners, Pacific Island sugarcane workers and Japanese pearl divers.

Such records require careful and critical reading. Australia's frontier history includes dispossession, exploitation and violence, and these realities must not be diminished. Historical sources can also reveal Aboriginal agency and document moments of curiosity, communication and exchange. Accounts of shared words, objects, ideas, images and knowledge may help develop a fuller understanding of encounters between Aboriginal people and newcomers. By examining these materials respectfully and, wherever possible, in partnership with relevant communities, the RGSSA can help bring neglected histories and geographies into clearer view.

The Society is already building on this approach. Aboriginal themes and speakers have featured in monthly lectures, and Aboriginal perspectives and operators have been

included in the travel program. Council has also agreed that the RGSSA should promote the *Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Way Map*, which is displayed prominently in the Society's Library and used by volunteers in interpreting the collections for visitors. Juxtaposed against *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the oldest map in our collection, and early Australian exploration maps, it encourages reflection on the different ways landscapes are known, named, represented and travelled.

A priority is to work with Aboriginal groups in the Lake Eyre Basin to support continued reprinting of the map and wider distribution to schools and the public. Other possible projects include examining Aboriginal place names recorded in the Society's journals, manuscripts and publications; exploring opportunities for joint naming; and mapping South Australia's rock engravings in partnership with Aboriginal communities and the South Australian Museum. The Society might also support a reprint of *Making Connections: A Journey along Central Australian Aboriginal Trading Routes*, a practical guide designed to deepen travellers' understanding of the Aboriginal landscape of the Lake Eyre Basin.

These possibilities point towards an approach that is constructive, scholarly and distinctively geographical. The aim is to create enduring educational and cultural value while strengthening relationships and recognising the continuing importance of Aboriginal knowledge of place and landscape. Meaningful work will depend on genuine consultation, respectful partnership and care in deciding how knowledge and collection materials should be interpreted and shared.

Through practical initiatives developed with appropriate partners, the RGSSA can contribute to reconciliation by adding to knowledge, broadening public understanding and supporting deeper appreciation of the many histories and geographies held within its collections. As we move forward, members input on potential projects is welcome.