



ABORIGINAL SACRED SITES LAWS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Last updated in January 2026



Heritage Act 2011 (NT)



*Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred
Sites Act 1989 (NT)*

What is Aboriginal heritage?

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal Cultural Heritage is protected under two separate laws: the *Heritage Act 2011* (**Heritage Act**) and the *Northern Territory Sacred Sites Act 1989* (**Sacred Sites Act**). Visit EDO's factsheet on [Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Laws in the Northern Territory](#) for more information.

Under the Sacred Sites Act, sacred sites are sites that are **sacred or significant** to Aboriginal people according to Aboriginal tradition. Sacred sites are protected whether or not they are registered on the Register of Sacred Sites.



Examples of Sacred Sites

- sites marking acts of creation
- burial grounds
- ceremonial sites
- sites where sacred objects are found

How are Aboriginal sacred sites protected?


The Sacred Sites Act protects sacred sites and establishes the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (**AAPA**). The AAPA works together with custodians of sacred sites and persons proposing to work on or use land to protect sacred sites from damage or interference.

Under the Sacred Sites Act it is an **offence** to:

- enter onto or remain on a sacred site without authority,
- carry out work on a sacred site,
- desecrate a sacred site,
- fail to comply with conditions of an Authority Certificate or Minister's Certificate, or
- record or communicate information of a secret nature.

A person does **not** commit an offence by carrying out works on sacred sites if:

- the person or company has been issued an Authority Certificate from AAPA and they comply with the conditions, or
- the person or company has been permitted to carry out the works under a Certificate issued by the Minister.



1800 626 239



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What can I do if a sacred site is under threat?

1. Consider registering a sacred site if it is culturally appropriate

All sacred sites in the Northern Territory are protected regardless of whether they are registered on the Register of Sacred Sites. However, registering a sacred site makes it easier for AAPA to prosecute any offences which may be committed in relation to the sacred site. An Aboriginal person who has responsibility for a site (Custodian) can apply to AAPA for the sacred site to be registered and information that is secret or sensitive will not be released to the public.

2. Report any damage to sacred sites to AAPA

If you suspect that a sacred site has been damaged or may be damaged, you should report your concerns to AAPA as soon as possible. Under the Sacred Sites Act, AAPA have the power to commence criminal proceedings against anyone who damages or desecrates a sacred site.

3. Have a say about the condition of Authority Certificates

A person proposing to carry out work which will affect a sacred site must apply to AAPA for an Authority Certificate. An Authority Certificate sets out the conditions for carrying out specific works on an area of land and/or sea. Within 60 days of receiving an application for an Authority Certificate, AAPA must consult with Custodians of sacred sites or Custodians within the area who may be affected by the works proposed to be carried out. However, recent amendments to the Sacred Sites Act in 2025 mean that AAPA can transfer existing Authority Certificates to new persons without consulting with the relevant Custodians of sacred sites or other affected persons.

4. Apply to the Federal Government for a Declaration

If none of the above options under NT laws apply to you, you can apply for a declaration to protect Aboriginal Heritage under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* (Cth). Visit EDO's factsheet on [First Nations Cultural Heritage and Federal Law](#) for more information.

For more information on registering a sacred site, or to find out whether you are a Custodian, you can contact **AAPA Darwin office** on:

☎ (08) 8999 4365

or the **AAPA Alice Springs office** on:

☎ (08) 8999 5023

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You can also use this [online form](#) to report any damage to sacred sites.

You can call the **AAPA Darwin office** on:

☎ (08) 8999 4365

or contact **AAPA Alice Springs office** on:

☎ (08) 8951 5023

✉ enquiries.aapa@aapant.org.au

You can apply for a **declaration** at:

☎ 1800 751 242

✉ atsihpa@dceew.gov.au

You can call the Environmental Defenders Office on **1800 626 239** for free legal advice.

☎ 1800 626 239

✉ first.nations.program@edo.org.au

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