The Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) is used by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) to manage and protect Aboriginal heritage in NSW. AHIMS stores hardcopy and digital information and provides a range of services relating to Aboriginal sites and Places, archaeological reports and photographs, Aboriginal Heritage Impact Permits, Aboriginal heritage conservation projects, Aboriginal assessments, Aboriginal site decision support tools, and DECCW management and repatriation of cultural materials.

Some of the information held in AHIMS is of a sensitive nature and may be restricted. AHIMS holds a small amount of personal or intellectual property information collected from Aboriginal people, mostly from work conducted by NSW Government departmental staff during the 1970s; this information is generally stored under a restricted access category. DECCW recognises and respects that all information relating to Aboriginal sites and places, cultural materials and Aboriginal heritage requires appropriate cultural management protocols to balance Aboriginal community concerns with the need for this information to be used to more effectively protect and manage Aboriginal heritage.

AHIMS consists of several related information systems that can be accessed within DECCW. Some of these systems and information services are available to external users. AHIMS includes:

- a password protected information system used by more than 400 DECCW staff to manage their Aboriginal heritage responsibilities across cultural heritage, regulation, and reserve, environmental and natural resource management

- a digital mapping system available to DECCW staff that supports the management of Aboriginal assessments

- public Aboriginal site register services, including AHIMS Web Service System (AWSS), providing initial Aboriginal site and other information via the Internet, with more detailed site information available on request

- an extensive digital and hardcopy register of information relating to Aboriginal sites, Aboriginal Places, archaeological reports, cultural materials and Aboriginal heritage photographs. Most original documentation is now stored at State Records and can be retrieved by AHIMS staff.
At 1 October 2010 information held on AHIMS included:
- more than 65,000 Aboriginal site recordings
- 70 gazetted Aboriginal Places and around 30 Aboriginal Place nominations
- 10,500 archaeological reports
- 33,000 AHIMS search service records since June 2001
- more than 11,000 Aboriginal site and heritage photographs
- more than 1300 cultural materials held in DECCW collections
- outcomes related to more than 200 Aboriginal heritage projects and planning for an additional 180 projects either in progress or proposed.

What information is available?
Information about Aboriginal objects, such as the location of the site, description of its features, photos and maps, is recorded on AHIMS using site cards. AHIMS also contains copies of archaeological reports submitted by consultants and others.

Why should information about Aboriginal objects be recorded in AHIMS?
Aboriginal objects which are not recorded in AHIMS are at risk of being harmed. This is because people carrying out activities will not know that Aboriginal objects are on their land or in the area of their activity and will not be able to avoid harming them.

There are obligations to check AHIMS as part of carrying out due diligence. This change was made in the National Parks and Wildlife Amendment Act 2010 which commenced on 1 October 2010. DECCW encourages everyone to record the location of Aboriginal objects on AHIMS so that as many Aboriginal objects can be protected as possible.

Why is this information available to non-Aboriginal people?
Before carrying out an activity that will disturb land, consider how the activity might affect Aboriginal objects or Places. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 it is an offence to harm or desecrate Aboriginal objects or Places (see fact sheet 3). The Due diligence code of practice for the protection of Aboriginal objects in NSW explains when AHIMS should be used to exercise due diligence to check if there are Aboriginal objects or Places in the area of the proposed activity (see fact sheet 2).

There are other reasons to consult AHIMS, including:
- in the process of buying or selling a property
- undertaking Aboriginal heritage research, studies and assessments
- undertaking Aboriginal community initiatives – these could be community based projects such as repatriations, Aboriginal Place declarations, site monitoring, or Caring for our Country projects.

What safeguards are in place to protect information on AHIMS?
Access to AWSS requires registration with DECCW and all searches will be recorded. Before information about Aboriginal sites is released DECCW will ask the person requesting information to explain why they need the information.

How is the information made available?
The information contained on AHIMS is available through AWSS which enables information about recorded Aboriginal objects and Places to be obtained in a more efficient way.

There are two types of searches that can be carried out. One type will be an instant free basic search which will tell people whether there are Aboriginal objects or Places located within the search area. The other type of search is an extensive search which will provide more information about Aboriginal objects that are located in the search area including location details. A fee may be charged for an extensive search.

People will also be able to obtain archaeological reports, copies of site cards and book a visit to search the AHIMS archives.

How are the results of a basic search made available?
Basic search results are provided in a report indicating whether there are any Aboriginal objects or Places in the area of the search. This report does not give any details of locations of the Aboriginal objects.

If a basic search report shows that there are Aboriginal objects present then a person would need to carry out an extensive search to obtain more details about the Aboriginal objects.

How are the results of an extensive search made available?
Extensive search results are made available in the form of a report which lists all recorded sites within the search area, with each record including the site identifying number, site type, site location and Australian Map Grid coordinates, date of recording and the name of the person who recorded the site.

If the area of the search is particularly large (for example a river catchment), a local government area or contains data of a sensitive nature (such as information regarding burials), a Data Licence Agreement may be required. This is an agreement between DECCW and a named client, and may contain additional specific conditions about the use of information contained on AHIMS.

How does DECCW handle sensitive information?
Sensitive information on AHIMS is identified as being ‘restricted’. The extensive report will show that something has been recorded, but if further information is required the ‘knowledge holders’ or ‘trustees’ of the information will need to be contacted.

How are new sites notified to AHIMS?
Under the NPW Act, there is an obligation to report the location of an Aboriginal object to DECCW by filling out a site recording form (www.environment.nsw.gov.au/licences/DECCAHIMSSiteRecordingForm.htm).
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Further information

If you don’t have access to the internet you can contact the AHIMS Registrar for assistance with your search on (02) 9585 6471, (02) 9585 6345 or (02) 9585 6157.

Further information on AHIMS is available from www.environment.nsw.gov.au/licences/WhatInformationCanYouObtainFromAHIMS.htm, by phoning the Hurstville office on (02) 9585 6470 or by email to ahims@environment.nsw.gov.au.