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Whispers from the Archives: Barriers to Hearing and Reclaiming Indigenous Narratives in Archival Research and Aboriginal Archaeology

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Abstract

This article explores the barriers to reclaiming and preserving Indigenous narratives in historic archives, focusing on the narrative case study of an Aboriginal woman (here a Kuruma woman, Sarah) from the Pilbara region of Western Australia (ca.1880-ca.1950). Barriers obstructed identification of, and access to, materials in archival collections, highlighting persistent challenges faced by researchers and Aboriginal community members. These included limited documentation, bureaucratic hurdles, and preservation issues, often exacerbated by copyright policies and institutional restrictions. Analysis reveals that access to historical documentation on Indigenous histories is still frequently obstructed, despite descendant communities being the (co)applicants of what are effectively family histories. This study provides further evidence of "New Protectionism," whereby restrictive access policies inhibit Indigenous communities and researchers from reclaiming cultural narratives. This article suggests reform in archival policies, reflects on the implications for future research and heritage preservation, and highlights the role of archival research in Aboriginal archaeological practice. The integration of documentary sources into archaeological inquiry enables a more comprehensive understanding of Indigenous histories, reinforcing the discipline's commitment to ethical research and collaborative knowledge production.

Keywords Historical research · Aboriginal archaeology · Archival research · Indigenous narratives · New Protectionism

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

This article investigates cumulative barriers to reclaiming and preserving Indigenous narratives in historic archives in Aboriginal archaeological practice. While these issues are longstanding, it remains crucial to advance discussion and refine methodologies for repatriating these suppressed stories, which are a direct (and continued) consequence of colonialism. This research began in 2023, a collaboration with the Robe River Kuruma Aboriginal Corporation (RRKAC) and Robe River Kuruma (RRK) Traditional Owners, the Australian Research Council (ARC) Desert People Project (DPP) team conducted on Robe River Kuruma Country (Fig. 1). During the fieldwork, the DPP and RRK team documented several occupation sites in rockshelters, and material culture linked to a known historical figure (Sarah) whose legacy the community was interested in further exploring. This paper, therefore, presents the multidisciplinary methods, theories, and outcomes derived from an honors dissertation, which sought to investigate Sarah's life and legacy through archival, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches. While this research extends beyond what is conventionally defined as Aboriginal archaeology, it adopts Harrison's (2004:3) archaeologies of attachment approach to tracing the connections between pastoral-

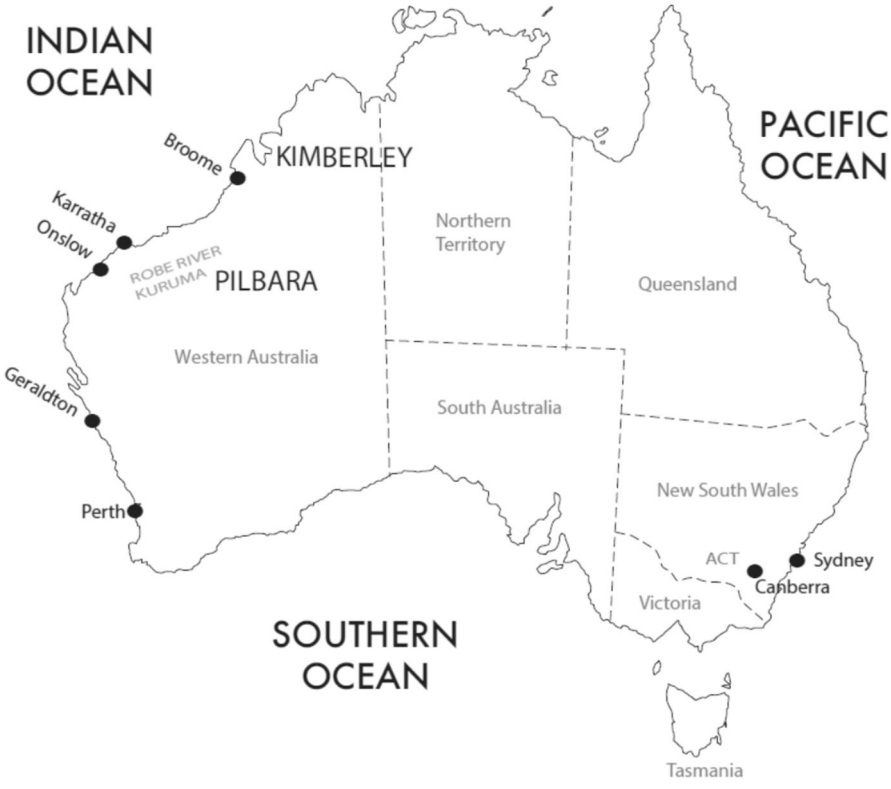

Fig. 1 Map indicating key locations referenced in the text, situated across Australia. Base map adapted from A. Paterson (2025), used with permission

ism, historic landscapes, and Aboriginal people. Here, archaeology is understood more broadly, as an interpretive framework that encompasses material, historical, and archival traces, aligning with Anderson's (2024:762) view that archives and archaeology are kindred disciplines whose dialogue enriches understanding of the past. This research is undertaken from my position as a non-Indigenous early career researcher engaged in a community-prioritized project, developed collaboratively with RRKAC through the codesign methodology of the Desert People Project.

In the late 1920s, after an incident with "white" authorities, Sarah fled the pastoral homestead where she had lived and worked, to live on the periphery of the station and surrounding lands. She then spent the following 15 years in near isolation in remote Pilbara montane country, maintaining sporadic contact with her community (Brehaut and Vitenbergs 2001:111–118; Hill 2011:359–430). Prior to this project, her story was preserved in two oral history accounts told by Elders now passed. Her story forms an important part of a rich oral history tradition for Aboriginal people in the wider Pilbara region, connecting the more recent past with deep-time ancestors (Murray 2001; Olive 1997, 2007; Young and Vitenbergs 2007). Research focused on investigating the individual's life and legacy, with her story holding continued significance within the community. This work set out to generate further details of Sarah's life story gleaned from the site visit and detailed archival research to complement the strong oral narratives which already existed (Brehaut and Vitenbergs. 2001:111–118; Hill 2011:359–430). It did not aim to reify or "correct" the story, but instead mobilize archives (official records, letters, photographs, and plans), place these in some historical context, and repatriate these to RRKAC members. In accordance with her family's wishes, detailed identifiable information is intentionally omitted. A central concern of this work is the critical interrogation of colonial archives. This tendency to assign greater "value" to the written word, often shaped by colonial frameworks, risks diminishing the importance of storytelling in original cultural forms. As researchers, our responsibility extends beyond analysis to include the repatriation and contextualization of the historical materials, emphasizing the sociopolitical climates of record creation. This entails acknowledging the prejudices inherent in colonial documentation and situating these materials within the broader context of lived Indigenous experience. Such efforts not only validate the primacy of oral histories, but also challenge the hegemonic narratives embedded within archival sources. Genovese and others (2019) explore court records as archives, including cultural, native title, and Royal Commission transcripts, examining intuitional barriers and access, and consider whom the archives serve as custodians. Issues and limitations inherent within colonial archives, such as racism, sexism, bias, omission, and selective preservation are exacerbated by additional access barriers imposed by institutions (Caswell et al. 2017:3; Hodder 2017: 454). Thieberger and others (2024) term this issue "New Protectionism," whereby Indigenous historic records are increasingly difficult to obtain by community members and researchers, enforced by overly restrictive, risk-averse institutional policies. Policies which are designed to address Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights often unintentionally deny Indigenous people timely access to records essential for family history research. In this context, these documents act simultaneously as barriers and tools: while they constrain Indigenous researchers and communities, they also provide vital pathways for reclamation.

This paper contributes to such ongoing discussions by critically reflecting on these barriers and highlighting the potential of records-based research as a tool for Indigenous heritage. The article is structured as follows: the methods section outlines the interdisciplinary approach employed and the challenges encountered in research. The results section presents key discoveries, including records that identified Sarah's burial site and critical details of her life. The discussion then considers barriers within archival systems, analyzes why continued engagement with these issues is necessary, and proposes future strategies to improve access and support Indigenous-led research.

Methods

This interdisciplinary study utilized methods drawn from archaeology and anthropology, incorporating archival research with ethnographic and archaeological data analysis to contribute to the tangible evidence surrounding the individual's story. Studies from other regions such as Fowler et al. (2016) and Roberts et al. (2020) in South Australia demonstrate that material objects and remains in rockshelters can carry significant cultural agency and meaning for descendant communities, supporting this approach of situating the material culture found in Sarah's rockshelters alongside oral and archival records. The expansion of historical records analysis within Australian Aboriginal archaeological practice presents an opportunity to move beyond traditional excavation-focused approaches, advocating for a more interdisciplinary framework that recognizes the enduring significance of historical records in shaping archaeological narratives (Anderson 2024:764). The focus was on systematically locating and analyzing documents related to Sarah and the broader historical context, rather than solely relying on traditional archaeological methods. Given the limitations of the recorded evidence, the approach was designed to uncover new information that complemented, rather than altered, the original oral histories, as requested by RRKAC within a community-led framework. The aim was not to retell a narrative that was not ours to recount, but to enrich the existing knowledge without attempting to "complete" the story. To achieve this, a range of federal, state, and local databases and networks were utilized, including those of the National Archives of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, State Library and State Records Office of Western Australia, and specific archives within the Pilbara region. Regional archives were examined during a study visit to Karratha, permitting an in-depth searching of records that were unavailable online. Informal discussions with staff and volunteers at small-scale local museums often uncovered new research pathways and relevant documents, revealing the importance of grassroot networking. The State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) and other regional libraries were systematically searched for general subject files and secondary historical sources. Experts and institutions associated with the case study were contacted with research requests, usually initially via email, to gain assistance in searching a variety of repositories.

Research using historic records face longstanding limitations including bias, racism, and sexism, with archives shaped by selective preservation that excludes many voices, including that of the individual. Application of critical archival studies was

useful for examining the context of creation, power relations, and decolonization, and helping to understanding what archives fail to document (Caswell et al. 2017:1–2). Foregrounding a case study and examining experiences by reading sources "against the grain" acknowledges the colonial context of creation, enabling examination of gaps, silences, and oppression in archives built on the inherent dominance of Western knowledge (de Leeuw 2012: 275; Tuhiwai Smith 2012:59). Hodder (2017:452) writes, "If archives are spaces of a society's collective memory, so too are they sites of loss, effacement and forgetting, where some voices are silent or silenced." Finding nineteenth- and twentieth-century records which explicitly name individual Aboriginal women was challenging (Ingram 2024:343). Researchers working with individual or family histories, including Aboriginal histories, frequently confront sparse and fragmented records; such challenges are a common feature of historical research that seeks to recover absent voices. The researcher who searches for a needle in a haystack is cautioned to avoid missing the haystack, emphasizing the need to expand research beyond the individual to appreciate the greater context (Schrag 2021: 98). Where individual-specific data was not available in this study, a range of sources were used with the aim of a better understanding of social context, exploring broader lifeways of Aboriginal women in the Pilbara and to add contextual understanding.

The archival process was characterized by practical and ethical complexities, necessitating frequent permissions and collaboration with RRKAC who provided constant community interface and guidance. Restricted availability posed a barrier; many documents required formal authorization, significantly delaying the research. A General Researcher Access Form had to be completed by both the author and RRKAC to attain a copy of the relevant Department of Native Affairs personal file. That a request from the native title holders, with descendants, took 14 weeks emphasizes the long lead times inherent in documentary research. While delays are common, this was particularly impactful for a one-year (here honors) project, as the deadline meant there was limited time to process the delayed documents and complete the analysis.

Analysis of the archaeological artifacts contributes directly to the tangible evidence to support or illuminate the gaps and silences in written colonial records. A contact-era hearth, personal clothing, and possible dietary objects were recovered from a rockshelter complex known to RRKAC and are reported elsewhere (Wesley 2024). The material culture from the rock shelter sites, combined with oral histories enabled triangulation of archival research results. Colonial archives, often perceived as neutral and objective, have reinforced structural biases by marginalizing voices and omitting Indigenous perspectives. These institutions have historically upheld dominant narratives while silencing or distorting the experiences of marginalized groups (Sentence 2019). The prioritization of oral tradition within Indigenous knowledge systems was devalued in archives which preferred written records, reinforcing Western biases in documentation. To address these gaps and reclaim Indigenous narratives, interdisciplinary approaches integrating oral history and historical record analysis are essential. Although record searches provided abundant general information, references to individuals were rare, reflecting the limitations of conventional documentary research methods, and restricted access, when key records were discovered. These limitations are compounded by institutional practices "protecting" archives, which often serve to isolate Traditional Owners and communities from

their own histories. While communities may request specific materials, the process assumes prior knowledge of the existence of such records, creating a significant barrier when many materials remain unpublicised or obscured (Barwick et al. 2020; Nicholls et al 2016:118–119).

This underscores the critical need for institutions to adopt more transparent and inclusive practices that prioritize accessibility for Indigenous communities with cultural authority and descendants, empowering them to reclaim and reinterpret their histories. Moreover, the scarcity of documentary references highlights the enduring value of oral histories and Dreamtime narratives, which remain vital repositories of cultural knowledge and identity, particularly in the face of exclusionary structures (Genovese 2016:40). Community-based participatory research models are essential in bridging these gaps, fostering collaboration that centers on Indigenous epistemologies and ensures historical research supports the sovereignty of the communities it seeks to serve (and see Nakata (2010) with respect to cultural interface methodology).

Results

The results of this research illustrate the importance of multidisciplinary methodologies, and the highly significant discoveries which can result from this, despite the barriers and hurdles encountered. One of the arguably most impactful results of this project was the discovery of the location of Sarah's grave in Onslow. Her final resting place was not known before commencing the project and was uncovered because of the historical record investigations. This discovery enabled her community and descendants to visit her grave and reconnect with this aspect of their ancestral heritage, representing a very real and immensely significant outcome for the community. Other critical records about Sarah's life, including medical records which provided the cause of death, and a death certificate with specific dates and burial details, were also uncovered. Cross-referencing the dates of her medical records with historical information resulted in the discovery that while being treated for illness in hospital, she lived through the bombing of a Western Australian northwest port by Japanese bombers during World War II. The 2023 DPP survey and excavation documented hearth features, fragments of cloth from Sarah's rockshelter, and other artifacts from the surrounding cultural landscape (Fig. 2). When read alongside oral histories and documentary "artifacts" such as her death certificate, these materials provide important contributions to Sarah's story. This explicitly interdisciplinary approach demonstrates how physical, oral, and archival evidence each play a vital role in recursively reconstructing the past.

The significant accessibility barriers encountered during the research are discussed here. Locating relevant documentation required extensive outreach involving a total of 76 emails to 14 organizations and seven individuals, resulting in 80 responses, many requiring follow up emails to clarify access or permissions. Notably, there was protracted correspondence with Aboriginal History Western Australia (AHWA), exchanging 25 emails to retrieve restricted records. The wait time of 71 business days (14 weeks) to consult these restricted records highlights the challenges which exist today in reclaiming and preserving Indigenous narratives. While the quantification



Fig. 2 Fragments of cloth material (circled) found in rockshelter complex associated with Sarah. Credit: DPP and RRKAC, 2023

of emails and follow-ups highlights the scale of work involved in obtaining records, it is acknowledged that such extensive correspondence is a routine part of historical research. Researchers frequently face similar delays and bureaucratic barriers that, in the absence of major changes in funding or policy, will continue to be part of the discipline. Delays in access exacerbate challenges for Aboriginal descendants in remote regions, community members without formal research experience and those for whom English is a second language, further complicating efforts to reclaim cultural heritage. More research into these types of barriers may contribute to developing better strategies for facilitating repatriation of documents and improving access for Aboriginal people and corporations.

Personalized, direct contact with individuals (such as past archivists and local history researchers), particularly through a university faculty connections and academic networks, was significantly more successful in accessing relevant information than contacting public institutions. Despite mandates to preserve and provide access to their collections, successful outcomes from organizations often required extensive communication with multiple individuals. Requests made via generic emails or online forms yielded the least success, suggesting that researchers without institutional support or academic networks may struggle to obtain records. Additionally, these efforts required internet access, and ability to craft emails to navigate institutional gatekeeping, especially regarding Aboriginal history documents, such as those held by AHWA and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Some organizations refused access, even after the detailed research collaboration with RRKAC was noted (there are detailed research contracts outlining governance, reporting, Intellectual Property [IP], research participation informa-

tion and consent, and so forth). One regional library only permitted entry following a formal research request by Dr. Byrne, with support from DPP, RRKAC, and the university. This is "New Protectionism," whereby Indigenous archival records are increasingly difficult to access by community members and researchers, enforced by overly restrictive, risk-averse institutional policies (Thieberger et al. 2024:11). The results of this research are consistent with the case for "New Protectionism," without questioning and fully acknowledging the centrality of IP and cultural protections (e.g. Janke 2021). These findings reveal the idea of "the archive" as one neatly accessible entity or network of buildings to be a misnomer. Rather, obtaining materials required repeated engagements with multiple experts and institutions, each with specific knowledge of relevant records, even though the records appeared to be publicly accessible. This complex process highlights challenges researchers face in acquiring comprehensive resources, especially when investigating individual life histories. As Genovese and others (2019:1) have recently noted, the idea of "the archive" has broadened in recent decades under pressure from intellectual, public, and institutional groups. It has involved scrutiny and critique of official archives' limitations and practices, as well as symbolic, affective, and theoretical expansion and heightened expectation of what "the archive" is or should be. The very language of "the archive" now carries freight as administrative practice, normative value, metaphor, description, and aspiration in different ways than it did in the twentieth century (Genovese et al. 2019).

Discussion

The results of this research project revealed several key barriers to reclaiming and preserving Indigenous narratives from historic archives. These are as follows:

Systemic Institutional Barriers

Access was frequently obstructed by bureaucratic and copyright restrictions across various organizations. Obtaining records necessitated extensive paperwork, with success relying on institutional support and community collaboration. The extended wait time of 14 weeks to secure permission to consult one document caused inevitable delays to the research process. For a one-year honors project, such delays were restrictive, limiting the ability to incorporate these materials in a timely manner. Additionally, community use of copyrighted recordings of oral histories held by AIATSIS required permissions and coordination with institutions in distant locations, despite permission from the original authors who had mistakenly assumed that donating the materials to AIATSIS would ensure their easy accessibility for community members. Institutional practices, shaped by restrictive policies and bureaucratic red tape, limit availability of Indigenous archival records. Copyright and access restrictions, a form of "New Protectionism" can prevent Indigenous communities from reclaiming their histories (Thieberger et al. 2024:15). The difficulties in accessing documents related to the individual's life and community reveal significant challenges which still exist today in reclaiming and preserving these narratives.

Physical and Bureaucratic Distance

Western Australia's geographical remoteness often compounded issues, as many archives were located considerable distance from the research site. Visits often required significant logistical coordination, further underscoring challenges in accessing materials. A substantial portion remain undigitized, and were not discoverable through public online catalogue searches, necessitating time-intensive in-person research or reliance on institutional staff to process research inquiries. However, institutions frequently lack the funding and staffing capacity to provide timely responses to such requests.

These geographical and administrative barriers disproportionately impact Indigenous communities, particularly those in remote regions of Western Australia. The bureaucratic complexities required to surmount access to family and cultural records further hinders the ability to preserve and reclaim Indigenous narratives. While frameworks such as the AIATSIS Family History Portal provide mechanisms for Indigenous archival research, they operate within the constraints of institutional policies and ethical governance frameworks, such as those outlined by Janke (2021). Although AIATSIS promulgates robust ethical guidelines, the organization is often hindered by slow processing times, which further exacerbate the barriers faced by Indigenous individuals seeking to reconnect with their histories. These challenges raise concerns about the feasibility of documentary research for those in remote areas and highlight the broader systematic issues in the accessibility of culturally significant records.

Preservation Challenges in Indigenous Histories

Gaps were worsened by preservation issues, with many records lost to natural disasters, deterioration, or neglect. This further underscores the role of Aboriginal archaeology in preserving such narratives, and in bridging archival gaps. This loss of cultural material reveals the fragility of physical archives and highlights the need for greater digital preservation initiatives which make materials easily discoverable and accessible.

Scarcity of Records for the Individual

Records for individuals, particularly Aboriginal women, are often limited, reflecting historical biases that often-exclude marginalized voices. Despite thorough searching, only a few records existed in this case study. The inability to locate a known photograph of Sarah highlights the limitations of digitization projects and lack of metadata for existing online collections, limiting the discoverability of such records. This results from the individual's remote location and efforts to evade colonial authorities; the existence of *any* records is remarkable. The scarcity of such records further underscores the importance of interdisciplinary research, and the value of pursuing archival research in Aboriginal archaeology, as when documents are found they can be very significant and valuable to descendant families.

Navigating these obstacles demanded privileges including education, institutional affiliations, funding from the Berndt Research Foundation, guidance from experienced researchers, and essential resources such as a reliable internet connection. These advantages enabled navigation through the often-time-consuming bureaucratic hurdles associated with historical records-based research. However, delays in accessing documents illustrate how such barriers disproportionately affect those without similar privileges. Aboriginal people living in remote regions such as the Pilbara, those without formal academic training or with English as a second language, would likely face significant difficulties in retrieving critical records. Even though the historical documents used in this project were technically public, copyright and access restrictions made reclaiming and preserving evidence about Sarah's story challenging. This research highlights broader systematic barriers to obtaining and preserving Indigenous narratives, reinforcing the need for enhanced support structures for documentary research. While centralized repositories such as AIATSIS advocate for a consolidated archival model, their scope remains limited, not comprehensively encompassing the vast array of regional and decentralised records. Many historical documents remain inaccessible due to their dispersion across various institutional holdings, including police and defense archives, which are unlikely to be digitized in the near future. Addressing these disparities through improved access policies and expanded initiatives would benefit both academic scholarship and Indigenous communities seeking to reconnect with their cultural heritage, reaffirming the critical role of archives in Aboriginal archaeological practice.

Conclusion

The barriers to identifying and accessing materials in this research, while challenging, are not unique; historians, historical archaeologists, and those working in Aboriginal historical studies routinely encounter similar obstacles. Highlighting these persistent issues is important, contributing to discussions about improving access and supporting community heritage research. In this article we outline the key barriers encountered in conducting our research and outline their impacts on the research process. We argue that documentary research methods deserve a more prominent place in Aboriginal archaeology, and that these access barriers do nothing to further this case. The results of this research demonstrate the incredible value and importance of archival research, for both academic purposes and for their direct values for Indigenous communities.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, colonial historical records are a primary, and often sole, source of family information due to widespread dispossession, dislocation, and destruction enacted during European colonization. Discovering and accessing these documents are therefore vital for Indigenous people today, seeking to fill gaps in their stories and make sense of what happened to their relations and ancestors, in efforts to continue preserving and passing down their culture, traditions, and stories.

There is a need to reform archival access policies and procedures to enable increased accessibility for Indigenous communities and researchers. Many institu-

tions conserving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander historical records have mandates claiming to preserve and provide access to their collections, yet in practice there are many barriers which prevent this, frequently due to lack of funding. Cultural repatriation is a core responsibility for all institutions holding Indigenous cultural materials, and expanded availability, initially focusing on locally based institutions, should form a key component of this.

Historical records analysis has a significant role to play in Aboriginal archaeology; it should not be relegated solely to the domain of history, historical archaeology, or limited to cursory desktop studies. Archives serve a crucial role in addressing key research questions and filling critical gaps in historical knowledge. They facilitate the reconnection of families with their ancestral histories, provide essential information on patterns of movement, including burial sites, and offer contextualized insights into past behaviors that are reflected in the archaeological record.

Incorporating historical research into Aboriginal archaeology enhances the triangulation of material evidence, oral histories, and documentary records, strengthening interpretations and deepening historical narratives, as illustrated here. Despite the challenges posed by access restrictions, analysis of institutional records can yield invaluable findings with real-world implications for cultural heritage management. Future research directions in this space could include increased digitization efforts, improved metadata to facilitate improved searching for tagging Indigenous records, and improved collaboration between archival repositories and local Indigenous groups, particularly in remote areas. The difference this makes in the relationships formed is profound; as evidenced in this project, enhanced accessibility empowers communities, reinforcing cultural connections and fostering meaningful partnerships between researchers and Indigenous groups.

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Data Availability This section may not be applicable, as this research was completed as part of an Honours degree at the University of Western Australia, access to datasets and material can be requested via the University of Western Australia as per the dissertation access statement.

Declarations

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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