

Elders the first to speak to Yoorrook commission

Aboriginal elders will be the first people to present their stories and evidence to the state's truth-telling commission on the many impacts of colonialism, racism and injustice on Indigenous Victorians.



Yoo-rrook Justice Comissioner Wergaia and Wamba Wamba elder Professor Eleanor Bourke.

By Miki Perkins
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The Yoorrook Justice Commission, formerly named Yoo-rrook, will announce on Monday that elders will be the first to speak to commissioners at “yarning circles” on Country across Victoria over the next three months, as part of a dialogue that will culminate in the commission’s interim report, due to be released in June.

Commissioners will visit significant historical and cultural sites with elders to discuss which matters should be the priority for the inquiry, and have one-on-one meetings with elders.

The five-person commission was due to commence public hearings in July last year but postponed them several times. Commissioners blamed COVID-19 restrictions for delays to the listening tour of regional areas to accept submissions from Aboriginal elders and organisations.

In January, the chief executive officer of the truth-telling commission, Josh Smith, and his office director, Alexandra Krummel, resigned, allegedly amid infighting between administrators and commissioners.

The commission now has an interim CEO, Elly Patira, who will guide the process for the next three months.

Professor Eleanor Bourke, the chair of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, said the voices of elders would be at the centre of the truth-telling commission and will ensure it is guided by, and grounded in, their cultural authority.

“Elders voices are paramount,” Professor Bourke said. “Their voices will underpin truth and justice for First Peoples. By prioritising elders first, Yoorrook will ensure their stories and truths are captured and included as evidence in its final recommendations.”

Elders will be given the option of having their stories included in the official public record of the impact of colonisation in Victoria.



Professor Bourke at a ceremony for the announcement of commissioners.

The Yoorrook commission has released a tight timetable of meetings ahead of the release of its interim report in June.

Commencing in March, there will be three phases of community engagement, Yoorrook’s formal launch on March 24, and meetings and formal hearings with elders from the end of April.

The first dedicated truth-telling and justice commission of its kind in Australia, it will examine systemic injustice experienced by Aboriginal communities in Victoria since European colonisation and is considered integral to the state’s treaty process. The

\$58 million commission was set up in partnership between the First People's Assembly and the Andrews government.

Contributions from traditional owners and First Nations people will be invited in the second half of 2022, and from the broader community after that. Further details of the support available to people participating in process, will be announced after the official launch in late March.

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