



# fragile

One of the lasting memories of the Boxing Day tsunami is of complete devastation — communities reduced to matchsticks by the force of the tidal wave and the survivors walking amongst the rubble, trying to make sense of all that had happened. Although news coverage of the disaster in the Indian Ocean was intense for many weeks, there was only intermittent information about the impact of the tsunami on the cultural and documentary heritage in the affected countries

Heritage sites, temples, galleries, libraries, museums, and archives were damaged by the earthquake and tsunami. The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) reported in January on the devastation: 52 libraries damaged in Sri Lanka; damage to temples in India and Sri Lanka; damage to museums in Indonesia and Sri Lanka; and damage to other heritage landscapes and sites in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The International Council on Archives (ICA) also reported that the Provincial Archives of Aceh in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, had lost 11 staff members and that the

ground floor of the archives had been severely damaged in the tsunami. Professional communities in Australia and overseas have rallied to raise funds or provide much needed assistance for the recovery and reconstruction of this cultural and documentary heritage. The Australian Society of Archivists recently held a fundraising night, with all profits going to the Banda Aceh archives.

The main records affected by the tsunami were land title records in Aceh. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the National Land Agency in Banda Aceh was flooded, lives were lost and 55 000 land records were submerged in sea water. This quantity of documents

represents 90% of the total collection of land records for Aceh. The National Land Agency has been drying records that survived the flooding of the office. Thankfully, records from the mid 1950s have land ownership details recorded in waterproof ink and are still legible, but earlier records may be more difficult to conserve.

Land records are fundamental to claiming title or ownership of land; without land title certificates or the agency's records, proving ownership of land can be a contested, difficult and time-consuming process. For survivors of the tsunami who have lost everything, including records proving their identity and their land title certificates, the records of the National Land Agency have an even greater significance, as these are the only records which may determine ownership. A report by Radio National estimated that only 25% of Aceh's population who lost homes can prove that they have an entitlement to the land. To assist in determining ownership, the National Land Agency has requested that land owners register their details, obtain statements from those who witnessed their ownership or occupation of the land, and identify their land through photographs of the area. This information will be used to corroborate the surviving land records.

The tsunami not only reminded us of the fragility of human lives and communities, but also the fragility of our cultural and documentary heritage.

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## Water: Friend or Foe?

Water has both damaging and restorative effects on paper. The photo (above) documents recent water damage to historical documents in Sydney. Paper swells in water, causing distortion; inks run, becoming illegible, and, if the documents stay wet, mould will grow. Ironically, though, water is a useful preservation weapon, used to humidify and relax creased and distorted items, wash documents that are discoloured and dissolve non-archival glues. Water relaxes the records so that they can be pressed and flattened safely.

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