

Museum Policy Reference Group Report 2005

Developing a Way Forward for Western Australia's Heritage Collections and Collectors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2003, the Minister for Culture and Arts, the Hon Sheila M^cHale MLA, appointed a Museum Policy Reference Group chaired by Peter Watson MLA, Member for Albany, to advise on matters to do with the collection of Western Australia's material heritage. This material is principally held in museums, galleries, libraries, indigenous cultural centres, language centres and keeping places, and with historical societies, many of which are located in the regional, rural and remote areas of the State. This report examines the nature and needs of Western Australia's share of the 'distributed national collection', and the issues and concerns of those engaged in its care.

A variety of research methodologies were utilised by the Museum Policy Reference Group. A review of literature on issues and trends facing collecting organisations was conducted. Meetings were held with stakeholders and practitioners across the collections sector. Familiarisation visits took place at a range of museums and case studies were prepared on a number of community museums and indigenous centres. A survey was sent to over 270 collecting organisations and to all local governments. To support those completing the survey, workshops were conducted by the Western Australian Museum's *Museum Assistance Program* on assessing the significance of collections and the items within. Policy frameworks and service delivery arrangements in Western Australia and the Eastern States were also examined.

The survey found that Western Australia has a rich diversity of heritage collections represented and exhibited by an equally diverse range of organisations. The majority of collections are managed by community-based organisations, usually located within a town and often near the town centre. The collections are commonly housed in heritage buildings, which are neither purpose built for the storage or display of heritage materials nor the delivery of public programs. This places the collections at risk of damage or loss, many of which include items of State and national significance. It also inhibits the development of new and changing exhibitions.

Survey results indicate that while almost one third of the State's collecting organisations have fully documented their collections, many have not, and a significant number have less than half of their collections documented. This has implications for the retention of historical information and recognition of cultural significance, as many of those with the associated knowledge are becoming less active in community life or aging.

Those engaged in the collection, conservation, maintenance and exhibition of the State's material heritage are frequently volunteers, and almost half of the State's collecting organisations have no paid staff. While training in documentation, significance assessment, conservation and maintenance is available through the tertiary institutions, the Western Australian Museum and Museums Australia (WA), most collecting organisations do not have the means to avail themselves of these services. Added to this, the training providers have limited resources and are often unable to meet the demand.

In most cases, the paid staff and volunteers responsible for collecting and caring for the State's material heritage, are also those responsible for maintaining the venue, exhibiting the collections and developing associated public programs. This situation is cause for frustration amongst volunteers and staff alike, many of whom recognise the potential for their collections to significantly benefit local and regional economies, but do not have the resources to capitalise on this potential. The need for 'hands on' professional assistance to share and focus the workload of volunteers has emerged as one of the most critical issues in the protection and enlivenment of the collections.

Regional collections often have particular cultural significance because they include items considered to be historically, technologically, socially or aesthetically valuable that represent regional development, change and identity. However, most regional collections currently have undetermined value. Establishing the provenance of items in regional collections is of high importance so that their significance can be determined and their conservation managed.

Indigenous cultural centres play an important and expanding role in the collection and maintenance of indigenous cultures and knowledge, while also making a significant contribution to local identity, community sustainability, employment and tourism. Indigenous communities have unique needs with regard to building, managing and extending their collections. Often located in rural and remote areas, indigenous communities are diverse and require specialised support for collection, conservation and communication activities.


Social history of Anglo-Celtic cultures predominates in WA collections, leaving significant scope for diversification. Collecting organisations could more effectively differentiate their places and collections by greater representation of indigenous and diverse cultures, and by featuring the natural environment. This has implications for tourism, land-care, regional and town identity. Greater emphasis on the contribution and interests of young people could be utilised to extend audience reach and encourage inter-generational renewal.

In acknowledgement of their importance as social and economic assets, state and local governments across Australia are increasingly adopting a strategic approach to the development of cultural heritage collections. The Museum Policy Reference Group found that while it is clear that the needs of individual collecting organisations in Western Australia vary, there are common issues across the sector that need to be addressed, without which, the full potential of Western Australia's material cultural heritage cannot be realised. The Museum Policy Reference Group presented 16 key recommendations for how the Western Australian Government can assist the collections sector in this State to fulfil its potential.

The Department of Culture and the Arts' (DCA) response to these recommendations has been grouped into three key actions, as a result of the first recommendation to develop an action plan that recognises the significance and use of collections and collecting organisations in Western Australia.

KEY ACTIONS >

THE FOLLOWING TABLE PRESENTS THESE KEY ACTIONS IN MORE DETAIL:

KEY ACTION	RECOMMENDATIONS	ACTIONS IN DETAIL
<p>KEY ACTION ONE:</p> <p>Advocate and support sector at Cultural Ministers Council (includes Collections Council of Australia, Collections Australia Network and Return of Indigenous Cultural Property Projects)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Work with relevant agencies to facilitate the development of regional heritage profiles and the mapping of collections and their significance. 3. Assist collecting organisations to represent the cultural and bio diversity of their communities and places, and to differentiate their collections from those of other communities. 4. Work with the collections sector to encourage implementation of national guidelines and benchmarks, to assist organisations to achieve their full potential. 6. Encourage collecting organisations to formulate and apply policies to guide their collections development, interpretation (including exhibitions, displays and public programs) and broader community involvement. 8. Advocate and broker the establishment of regionally based and outreach heritage collections professionals for the sector. 12. Recognise and promote the existing and potential role that museums and indigenous cultural centres play in community capacity building, identity, well-being and in advancing reconciliation and social cohesion. 13. Develop new partnerships between DCA and other relevant local, regional, state and federal agencies to improve the quality and contribution of collecting organisations to social and regional development. 14. Advocate best practice models and in the longer term, develop a state-wide Memorandum of Understanding with local government to support quality collections, operations and facilities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Increase funding to Collections Council of Australia 1.2 Pilot Collections Council of Australia Regional Hub project in WA (dependant on Australian Government funding) 1.3 Liaise with Art Gallery and WA Museum for Repatriation of Indigenous Cultural Property Program 1.4 Explore opportunities to support the inclusion of WA best practice case studies in a national publication <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 200px;">  <p>KEY ACTION</p> </div>

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<p>KEY ACTION TWO:</p> <p>Strengthen relationships with key partners – Museums Australia WA and the Royal WA Historical Society</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Work with the collections sector to encourage implementation of national guidelines and benchmarks, to assist organisations to achieve their full potential. 5. Examine support measures and incentives to assist organisations to broaden their audiences, including consideration of the predicted new wave of collections users and usage patterns. 9. Support the volunteer workforce and acknowledge its crucial role in the development and operation of community museums. 10. Develop a long-term framework and guidelines for the delivery of more effective and appropriate training for the collections sector. 11. Review the existing support services available to Western Australia's community based collections sector to achieve a more effective system. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Consider multi-year contracting with Museums Australia WA and Royal WA Historical Society 2.2 Encourage central web page for all funding programs and publications/resources 2.3 Advocate to Department of Education and Training and TAFE for training programs 2.4 Align services with reviewed WA Museum MAP services

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<p>KEY ACTION THREE:</p> <p>Increase funding available through DCA grants programs</p>	<p>7. Explore new arrangements for funding to better support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strategic and long-term planning by collecting organisations • development of high quality visitor experiences • care and management of collections • employment of professional staff • access to heritage specialists • development of purpose-designed and co-located cultural facilities • new partnerships with State agencies, eg Tourism, Seniors Interests, Multicultural Interests, Indigenous Affairs • Partnerships with other collecting organisations. <p>15. Encourage the development of purpose designed and co-located cultural facilities in partnership with local government and other relevant State and federal agencies.</p> <p>16. Assist indigenous cultural centres and keeping places to build, maintain and interpret their own collections and advocate greater funding support and practical assistance for these.</p>	<p>3.1 Assess current demand to existing funding pools</p> <p>3.2 Set up internships at key leading institutions recognised for best practice (Expand Emerging Curator program)</p> <p>3.3 Advocate for extension of the Community Cultural and Arts Facilities Fund</p> <p>3.4 Expand Short-Term Artist in Residence funding for projects in any creative artform eg. writing, new media, music, visual arts.</p> <p>3.5 Establish new devolved funding program.</p>

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