

# The Collections Council of Australia

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## Citation:

Birtley M 2006, 'The Collections Council of Australia' paper prepared for the 2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee, Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra, <<http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006/emerging/collections/index.html>>

The Collections Council of Australia Ltd was established in September 2004 by the Cultural Ministers Council. The Collections Council's origins lie in the 2002 *Study into the Key Needs of Collecting Institutions in the Heritage Sector* by Deakin University. This study found that a dominant need for archives, galleries, libraries and museums was perceived to be a lack of nation-wide coordination for the collections sector. The Collections Council's mandate, therefore, is to speak with one voice for collections in Australia.

The purpose of the Collections Council is to assist collecting organisations achieve their potential, and to connect collections sustainably with their current and future communities. Many of the Collections Council's objectives and activities relate to issues that were identified in the *Key Needs* study, and also in the 2001 Australian *State of the Environment* Report.

The Collections Council's goals are:

1. To develop capacity and efficiencies within the collections sector.
2. To develop links between the collections sector and the wider community.
3. To advocate collections as a powerful means of achieving cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability.

The Collections Council is a national not-for-profit organisation supported by the federal, state and territory governments through the Cultural Ministers Council. As a company limited by guarantee, the Collections Council is governed by a Board of twelve Directors, with four positions filled by the Chairs of industry councils in the major collecting 'domains': archives, galleries, libraries, and museums. The office of the Collections Council is located in Adelaide and is hosted by the Libraries Board of South Australia.

## Collections in Australia

The cultural collections of Australia are central to the Australian sense of identity and are at the core of community life. From the long history of Australian Indigenous peoples to the recent history of migration to the country, and the emergence of electronically networked global communities, our cultural collections represent the essence of the past, present and future memory of the country; they shape our psyche, record our development, provide insight into our national spirit, and inspire us for the future.

Australia's collections are widely distributed. They can be found in community, corporate or civic spaces; in scientific and educational organisations; and also in private hands. They may be brought together under different organisational names such as archives, galleries, libraries and knowledge centres, museums, Indigenous cultural resource centres and keeping places, historical societies and heritage places. Collections are composed of things that may be movable, or fixed in location. These things may be real and tangible, or may exist in digital format in a virtual realm. Botanical and zoological collections may include living things.

Wherever they are, and whatever their nature, it is critically important to preserve and protect Australia's collections because of their identifiable significance to current and future Australians.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data relating to the four major collecting domains comes from the end of June 2004, and shows that, in the surveyed sample, there were:

- 1877 collecting organisations, comprising 160 galleries, 548 public library and archives institutions, and 1,169 museums (including 381 historic properties/sites, 673 social history museums and 115 other types of museums).
- Over 115 million items and over 600 shelf-kilometres of records, including 54.9 million museum objects and artworks, 52.8 million lending books and 8.8 million heritage items in Australia's local, state and national libraries. Those archives surveyed by the ABS held 629,100 metres of records.
- More than 48,000 personnel: libraries and archives had a total of 13,282 employees and 6,853 volunteers, while museums and galleries had a total of 7,624 employees and 20,443 volunteers.

Each collecting domain is diverse in nature, different in structure and at a different stage of development. Each has unique issues but there are also commonalities of purpose and needs associated with the collection, preservation, study and presentation of the nation's heritage. The Collections Council recognises that there is significant potential for collecting organisations to work collaboratively — with each other, and with communities — to achieve improved outcomes for all.

## **Collections and sustainability**

Collections help people understand changes occurring over time in cultures, societies and the environment. Careful additions to collections will help future generations gain new perspectives on these changes. Australia's cultural and natural collections have been identified as 'an important national asset and a legacy for future generations'. This praise is, however, qualified by a warning: 'they may become a future liability if we fail to collect, conserve and document with our long-term obligations and liabilities in mind.' (Museums Australia 2003).

The responsible care, development and use of collections by their custodians involves recognition of the principle of sustainability — being able to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland 1987, cited in Museums Australia 2003). Community involvement in decision-making about matters that will affect future generations is regarded as a powerful way of ensuring generational equity.

As Museums Australia's *Museums and Sustainability: Guidelines...* make clear, collecting organisations can contribute to cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability by adhering to a number of general sustainability principles and by making practical contributions in areas such as collection management, decision-making and advocacy, education and role-modelling (for communities and the workforce), and in operational fields such as the buildings and grounds, procurement, and the management of waste, water, energy, motor vehicles, and pollution.

The Collections Council encourages the recognition of progress towards achievement of sustainability against each of the four essential pillars of sustainability: culture, society, environment and economy.

## **Strategies for action**

The Collections Council has identified three broad strategies for action in the achievement of its goals and objectives. These strategies acknowledge the distributed nature of collections (many are located in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia), the variety of communities that have actual or potential interest in collections, and the resources available to the Council and its staff. The strategies are:

**Networks:** Physical and virtual networks offer a means for supporting and resourcing those who work with collections, for linking collections with other collections, for connecting communities of audiences and users with collections, and for stimulating collaborative projects. Physical networks facilitate personal exchanges that lead to learning and development; virtual networks make current, consistent and timely information available via the internet. The Collections Council will assist with the establishment, development and maintenance of physical and virtual networks for the collections sector. The Council is planning close involvement with both the development of a regionally-based, face-to-face strategy for supporting collections practitioners, and with on-line networks that link collections and make them accessible.

**Research and development:** While considerable research has been completed in the professional fields aligned with each of the four collecting domains, there is little available that draws together the whole collections sector. Information is required about the sector's needs, about emerging trends and issues, about the major responsibility for digitisation of information and the preservation of digital content, and about the guidelines and standards that underpin sustainable development. The Collections Council will play an important leadership role by gathering and analysing new and existing data that can inform decision-making by stakeholders, and will assist in measuring progress towards sustainability. The Council has commenced research into the needs of the collecting sector for conservators, and will publish the findings on its website at [www.collectionscouncil.com.au](http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au) in 2006.

**Communication:** The diversity of the sector is such that it will require commitment from all three levels of government, the private sector, local communities and the organisations comprising the collections sector to ensure stability and sustainability for collections. The Collections Council will advocate on behalf of collections to gain this commitment. The Council will prepare submissions on issues of relevance to the sector, will disseminate and promote information concerning the sector, and will act as a forum for ideas and initiatives that bring together communities and collections. In 2005, for example, the Council presented a submission about collections at (and associated with) heritage places to the Productivity Commission's *Enquiry into the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*.

## **A vision for collections in the future**

The vision of the Collections Council is for collections to be stable and sustainable, clearly defined, universally accessible, used and valued by communities, and developed collaboratively by collecting organisations.

### **Further information**

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### **Reference sources**

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, *Public Libraries 2003-04* Document 8561.0, 29 April 2005.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, *Museums 2003-04* Document 8560.0, 27 May 2005.

Museums Australia 2003, *Museums and Sustainability: Guidelines for policy and practice in museums and galleries*, available at: [www.museumsaustralia.org.au](http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au) (then select What we do > Policies).