South Australian Museum

Collections Policy

2009 – 2014

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14. COLLECTIONS POLICY

PART 1

Executive Summary

The South Australian Museum Collections Policy outlines collecting priorities and management practices for the next five years 2009-2014. It has been prepared in two parts, the first covering Museum wide collections direction, underpinning the mission and strategic endeavours of the Museum, and the second detailing individual collection policies, practices and programs.

The South Australian Museum has been collecting cultural material and natural history specimens since its inception in 1856. As defined by the Museum Act (1976-1985) the South Australian Museum is the only legislated body within the state of South Australia with the remit to collect and preserve in perpetuity zoological, geological and ethnographic items. There are now over 3.5 million individually labelled natural history specimens and several hundred thousand ethnographic objects and archives. Highlights include the largest and most extensive collection of Australian Aboriginal material in the world, the most important historical collection of Australian entomology in the world, one of the largest wildlife tissue banks in the world and the most important Ediacaran fossil collection in the southern hemisphere. Indeed all Museum collections encompass material of both state and national significance.

We cannot adequately undertake research without our collections. These provide irreplaceable references, or records, against which we are constantly building and modifying our knowledge and understanding of our natural and cultural worlds. They represent a vital part of Australia’s national heritage and play an integral role in the international scientific accord to document our world. They are an essential part of Australia’s future as they provide the raw material on which researchers can discover the extent and character of biological and cultural diversity and how they may be sustained in the future.

Part 1 identifies broader collections policy including the Museum’s role and objectives, standards and guidelines, what we collect and for whom, selection criteria, what we do not collect, collaboration with other collecting institutions, acquisitions, loans, deaccession and disposal, documentation, conservation, storage, access and stewardship. The same parameters are articulated in greater detail for each collection in Part 2. A collections management plan, encompassing collection specific issues, practices and direction is provided for Australian Ethnology and Archaeology, Foreign Ethnology, History of Science, the Australian Polar Collection, Palaeontology, Mineralogy, Terrestrial Invertebrates, Marine Invertebrates, Parasitology, the Australian Biological Tissue Collection, Ichthyology, Ornithology, Herpetology and Mammalogy.
1 Definitions

Accessioning - Accessioning is the formal process of accepting and recording an object or specimen as a collection item. Upon formal accessioning an item may be deemed to be part of the 'State Collection' as defined in the Museum Act 1976-1985.

Acquiring – This is the process by which the Museum becomes responsible for an item which may or may not be accessioned. The South Australian Museum will take the same care and precautions for the protection of acquired items as it does for those accessioned into its collections.

Ancestral remains - Ancestral remains are comprised of human biology specimens from across the world. Such remains are predominately skeletal material which has been derived from archaeological activity. This category does not include human hair, for example, that has been used in the manufacture of artefacts.

Bequest – Acquisition involving an individual transferring title of an item to the institution upon his or her death, through a will.

Deaccessioning - Deaccessioning is the formal process of removing an item permanently from the collections.

Donations – A donation is an item that is given to the Museum without encumbrance.

Item – The general term used for an object, artefact, record or specimen.

Item Entry – Items placed in the custody of the Museum are not owned by the Museum but are left temporarily in the Museum for a specific purpose such as attribution, authentication, identification, examination for possible gift, exchange or purchase. Such items will be receipted using the Item Entry Form.

Loans – Loans are temporary transfers of collection items from the Museum, or temporary transfers of similar items to the Museum for stated Museum purposes, or purposes approved by the Museum. The transfers do not involve a change of ownership.

Lot – The term used to define a group of specimens recovered from the same location at the same time. These groups are often stored and documented together.

Museum – The South Australian Museum.

Provenance – The proven or documented place of origin, use, history and ownership of an object.
Record – Records relating to recording unique identifiers, provenance, source, description, date and location. In terms of Archives a record is defined by the State Records Act as encompassing all formats, maps, drawings, etc.

Registration – The process of entering museum item into the recording systems of a museum by assigning a unique number, physically numbering the object, recording that number in a register and noting its details.

Restricted Material – Restricted material is a collection item, image, data or information, to which unrestricted access may cause offence or endanger the safety or sanctity of that item, image, data or information or of a locality from which the material came.

Service Materials – Service materials are assemblages of items held by the Museum sections for the purpose of public education and interpretation. Although documented and tracked, these items are not accessioned and are not part of the collections.

State Collections – The State Collections are the aggregates of accessioned collection items of scientific or historical interest vested in the Museum Board. (Museum Act 1976-1985)

Type Specimen – A type specimen is a zoological or mineral item that serves as the base for the name of a taxon.

Voucher Specimen – A voucher specimen is a zoological or mineral item that is collected and lodged in the Museum for the purpose of vouching or confirming its identity when referred to or examined in another study such as a biological survey.

2 Museum Role, Vision and Objectives

Museum Role (Annual Report 2008-09)

To increase knowledge and understanding of our natural and cultural heritage; to serve the community by acquiring, preserving, interpreting and presenting to the public, material evidence concerning people and nature; and to provide opportunities for study, education and enjoyment.

Objectives

Collect and preserve the State’s heritage in the areas of natural history and ethnography, along with relevant books, documents and other materials germane to extending knowledge of, and providing an historical perspective on environments and cultures.
Develop the Museum as a key research institution in its areas of strength: to disseminate its research results and to strengthen ties to relevant industry and academic institutions in the State.

Play a key role in educating the public about the State’s natural heritage, its environment, scientific research and Aboriginal cultures.

The Museum Act (1976-1985)

Key elements of the Museum Act are specifically related to collections. These include:
- collect and preserve natural history and ethnographic specimens, artefacts, documents and other relevant materials,
- study and interpret the collections and the subjects they represent,
- make the results of the museum’s work available to those who reasonably seek advice and assistance.

3 Standards & Guidelines

The South Australian Museum is committed to achieving standards of excellence as defined by various professional codes. This collection policy conforms to the relevant provisions of the following codes and standards;

- ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, 2003 (www.icom.org)
- Collections Council of Australia, 2008, National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries - Version 1.0
- CIDOC - The International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (http://cidoc.mediahost.org/)
- SPNCH, 1998, “Guidelines for the Care of Natural History Collections” (www.spnhc.org)
Museums Australia, 1997, “Museums and Cultural Diversity”.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services (ATSIPLAIS).
Museums Australia (Inc), 2005, “Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities, principles and guidelines for Australian museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage”, Canberra.

SA Museum Policies and Procedures


4 Collecting for whom

The Museum collects for the benefit of all South Australians. Given the significance of its collections, the Museum also has a responsibility for servicing the needs of national and international visitors to its sites as well as remote users. The Museum is therefore committed to digitising as much of the collections as possible to facilitate access to information by all users, be they in-house or via the WWW.
The Museum recognises that audiences have differing interests and experiences, and aims to provide a range of interpretation and services to meet these needs. Museum staff interpret the collections and communicate with visitors and remote users through galleries and exhibitions, publications, demonstrations, education, events, outreach and the WWW. The Museum is committed to providing access to its collections, which may be used as research and study materials by both local and remote users.

The Museum also acknowledges the interests of commercial users, such as television production companies and publishers, in its collections. Commercial use of the collections will be encouraged, unless it compromises the integrity and/or preservation of the items in question, as a means of raising and increasing public awareness of the Museum’s collections. Any commercial income directly arising from the use of the collections will be applied for the benefit of the collections.

5 What we collect – Collections Focus

Spatial and temporal characteristics

As defined by the Museum Act (1976-1985), the South Australian Museum is the only legislated body within the state of South Australia with the remit to collect and preserve in perpetuity zoological, geological and ethnographic items. As such the primary focus of the Museum's collections will be South Australia.

Items from outside South Australia will be collected and held primarily when they are necessary for a better understanding of regional phenomena, for comparative scientific or cultural study, for interpretive purposes or when such items have become part of South Australia’s history or culture. Areas of particular interest include Australia, Antarctica, South East Asia and the South West Pacific.

Given the Museum's strengths in collection areas ranging from South Australian palaeontology to contemporary natural and cultural diversity, the Museum's collections are not confined by temporal parameters.

Contemporary relevance – our ‘Reference Library of Life’

It is vital that the South Australian Museum maintains an active program of collections development in areas of zoological, geological and cultural diversity in order to reinforce its position as the key resource for these items in South Australia. The Museum is therefore fully committed to the Biological Survey program undertaken by the Dept of Environment and Heritage and will collaborate with allied bodies including PIRSA, SARDI and South Australian Universities.
Historical significance

With almost 150 years of collecting history, it is inevitable that some collections accumulated by the Museum may not hold the same relevance today as they may have held in the past. Some, such as the Egyptology collection, nevertheless hold a special place within the South Australian psyche. These collections will be managed and cared for with the same standards as those applied to contemporary collections.

Research

Collections resulting from specific research initiatives will only be accessioned into the State Collections where they meet the selection criteria identified in section 5 as well as those pertaining to the specific collection in question (Part 2). Collecting to address specific research criteria may also be integrated into core collections.

Collections Focus

Ever diminishing resources have forced museums to reassess their position within the wider cultural and scientific communities. Increasingly museums are cooperating with like institutions to minimise overlaps in research and collections development and work more collaboratively to ensure limited resources are utilised more efficiently. Based on collection strengths together with contemporary research, interpretation and education priorities at state and national levels, the Museum’s collections focus on:

- Natural diversity and representativeness
- Cultural diversity and representativeness
- Australian ethnology and archaeology
- Southern oceans
- Arid zones
- Fresh water ecology
- Polar exploration and History of Science
- Australian palaeontology and mineralogy

Items from living cultures

The Museum will work with Indigenous communities to ensure the integrity of collections and the appropriate access mechanisms.

Collecting animal specimens
Animals shall be collected according to the legislative requirements of the state of South Australia. The Department of Environment and Heritage, the Royal Zoological Society of SA Inc., and the South Australian Museum have formed a combined animal ethics committee, called the “Wildlife Animal Ethics Committee”. Drawn from members of staff at each institution together with external representatives from the RSPCA, the veterinarian profession and members of the public, the committee has the power to approve or decline any collecting projects.

Deposition of Types

Since 1980 most state and federal collecting bodies have agreed that all type material should be deposited in the relevant state museum. Accordingly South Australian type material must be deposited in the South Australian Museum.

Lodgement of Voucher Specimens

Persons undertaking taxonomic, ecological, biogeographical or physiological studies on non-domestic animals in South Australia will be required to lodge in the South Australian Museum voucher specimens that have been formally described, with relevant data.

6.0 Selection criteria

Criteria pertaining to the selection of items for the State Collection will be based on those outlined in section 5 together with specific criteria identified at the individual collection level (Part 2). Reference should also be made to the ‘Collecting Priorities 2008-2012’ document, released in 2008.¹

Other than in exceptional circumstances the following criteria will apply to all collections;

- Items may be acquired by donation, bequest, exchange, purchase or field collecting activities,
- Items will only be accessioned into collections if accompanied by adequate contextual and/or scientific data,
- Full title must accompany any item to be accessioned into the collections,
- There are no encumbrances attached to the item(s).

Significance

¹ South Australian Museum, 2008, Collecting Priorities 2008-2012
Significance criteria, based on guidelines provided by the Collections Council of Australia and articulated for each collection in Part 2, will be used to inform the acquisitions process. In general items will be assessed against one of four primary criteria:
- historic,
- artistic or aesthetic,
- scientific or research,
- social or spiritual.

Comparative criteria will be used to evaluate the degree of significance including:
- provenance,
- rarity or representativeness,
- condition or completeness,
- interpretive capacity.

A ‘statement of significance’ will accompany any requests to the Museum Board for funding in support of new acquisitions.

7.0 What we do not collect

The South Australian Museum is committed to achieving professional standards for all items in its care within the framework of limited resources of space, staff, funds and conservation capacity for managing the collections. This inevitably means that some items may not be acquired at all because they are too large, complex or sensitive to be accommodated within available resources.

The Museum will not acquire any item illegally obtained, removed or imported including stolen and endangered items and will endeavour to abide by the guidelines provided by the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property as well as those pertaining to CITES.

The Museum will not collect ancestral remains for any purpose. The Board of the South Australian Museum has a policy of actively consulting with relevant communities over the fate of the ancestral remains collection. This has led to the return of many ancestral remains back to the care of Indigenous custodians.

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3 Endangered specimens may be acquired but only with approval permits from the appropriate authorities.
4 http://www.un-documents.net/cppiielp.htm
5 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)
Other than in exceptional circumstances the Museum will not collect items that are core to the collection priorities of allied collecting institutions.

8.0 Consultation with other collecting bodies

The South Australian Museum respects the collecting interests and catchment areas of other museums and collecting institutions. The Museum will consult with these bodies where there are overlapping interests and refer items to more appropriate institutions where relevant. The Museum is committed to building stronger relationships with relevant bodies to avoid collecting conflicts, identify gaps in collecting policies and develop research collaboration. Such arrangements will apply to both state and national collecting and allied institutions.

9.0 Access & Stewardship

Collections Access

The South Australian Museum encourages the widest possible access to the collections entrusted to its care, and by doing so seeks to document, research and illuminate the diversity of the natural world and the lives of past and present peoples.

Documentation

Evidence of the identification, condition, history, or scientific value of an object, specimen or collection when recorded in a permanent manner enhances the value of the item. These records may actually have to substitute for the item should the item itself deteriorate or be destroyed.

Written registers and other paper based accessions records will remain the primary source for accessions entries. In an effort to widen access to collections data and minimise direct handling of items, the digitisation of collections data and images will be a priority.

Utilising appropriate Information Communications technology (ICT), the South Australian Museum will endeavour to develop an end-to-end solution that will provide real time, virtual access to collections data in galleries and the WWW that target the needs of different audiences. The Museum is keen to collaborate with other museums and collecting bodies in order to improve the delivery of public collections information.

services by using networked electronic media to link collections. The Museum is therefore committed to national and international initiatives including the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), the Online Zoological Collections in Australian Museums (OZCAM) and the Atlas of Living Australia.8

Conservation

The South Australian Museum is committed to providing a balance between access to the collections and preserving them in perpetuity. Under the current arrangement, all conservation work for the South Australian Museum is undertaken by ArtLab Australia. The South Australian Museum’s Conservation and Preservation Strategy9 is based on three program streams;

- Preventive conservation (50%),
- Exhibitions and loans (25%),
- Remedial treatment of specific items (Collections Treatment Program) (25%).

The model will vary to some extent related to specific programming needs however it reflects the strategic thrust of the Museum’s objective to focus on broad-scale preventive conservation management of its collections.

Storage and security

By definition a museum has a long-term purpose and must possess permanent collections in relation to its stated objectives. Appropriate storage of collections in environmentally controlled and secure stores is therefore a core activity of the Museum. The commitment to meeting and improving standards of care and accommodation of collections is upheld through considerable investment of space, time and money in existing and new display and storage for the collections. The South Australian Museum will continue to work with Arts SA to support the development of new or improved storage facilities to ensure adequate environmental conditions and storage capacity is available for all museum collections.

Collection Audit and Valuation

The regular valuation of the collections of the Museum Board is mandated by the Treasurer’s Accounting Policy Statement Number 3 under the Revaluation of Non-Current Assets. The most recent valuation undertaking was completed in June 2006 and included a valuation of items deemed to have market value (Heritage collections) together with a cost of recovery valuation applied to all non-Heritage collections.10

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Collection Audits will accompany the valuations process. In general natural history collections will be audited over a ten-year cycle and heritage collections will be audited over a five-year cycle.  

Reproduction and Copyright

In general the Copyright Act 1968 and its amendments together with Museum policy in this area will govern reproduction and copyright pertaining to Museum collections.  

10 Item Entry

All items deposited with the Museum for the purposes of donation, sale, loan or identification will be receipted using the Item Entry & Exit Form. The Museum will take the same care and precautions for the protection of the item(s), whilst they are in its custody, as it does for those in its permanent collections.

Museum staff are not authorised to give valuations, to assist in the disposal of private property, or to express opinions regarding the merits of business firms.

11 Loans

In endeavouring to provide the widest possible access to the collections, loans to and from the South Australian Museum will be encouraged.

In general non-commercial and commercial loans will be available to institutions and indigenous communities rather than individuals.

The loan period must be fixed and must not exceed five years. In exceptional circumstances Type specimens may be sent to other museums or similar institutions for not more than one year. Loans may be extended subject to receipt of a written application not later than one month before the expiration of the initial loan agreement.

All profits derived from commercial loans will be retained for collection related purposes.

Loans will be fully documented utilising the Museum’s commercial and non-commercial loan forms. Specific conditions pertaining to individual loans will be articulated in the accompanying loan forms.

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11 The South Australian Museum – Collection Audit - Position Statement, 2007
13 South Australian Museum – Item Entry & Exit Form, 2002
14 SA Museum Loan Form, Revised 2003
The management of all loans within the Museum and externally is the responsibility of the relevant Collection Manager who in turn is responsible to the Head of Collections, the Director and the Museum Board. The Collection Manager may consult with conservation, curatorial, research and exhibitions specialists where appropriate, to ensure the preservation and integrity of the item(s) is upheld at all times.

12 Deaccession and Disposal

By definition a museum has a long-term purpose and must possess (or intend to acquire) permanent collections in relation to its stated objectives. The South Australian Museum Board accepts the principle that there is a strong presumption against the disposal of any items in the Museum’s collections except as set out below.

The decision to dispose of an item, whether by exchange, sale, gift or destruction, will be the responsibility of the South Australian Museum Board acting on the advice of Museum staff with relevant professional expertise\(^5\). Such advice will be based on one or more of the following grounds:

- The item is to be repatriated,
- The item is to be exchanged,
- The item is destroyed or damaged beyond repair,
- The item poses a danger or health risk,
- The item does not fall within the collections policy,
- Full title in the item cannot be established,
- The item is proved to be a fake,
- The item will be more valuable for increasing knowledge in a particular area through destructive analysis,
- The item will be more useful as a service material.

Full records will be kept of such decisions and the items involved and proper arrangements made for the preservation and/or transfer, as appropriate, of the documentation relating to the items concerned, including photographic records where practicable. Where appropriate, items will be deaccessioned by striking their entry from the relevant accession register, but full records including the exit documents, in the form of either originals or copies will be retained.

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\(^{15}\) SA Museum Act, 1976–1985, Section 13(3)(b) In the case of items for destructive analysis, advice from research staff will also be considered.
Once an item has been approved for disposal, the donor (or their heirs) will be contacted and offered the return of the item. Should this prove unsuccessful priority will then be given to retaining the item within the public domain and with this in view it will be offered first, by exchange, gift or sale, to recognised museums or collecting institutions before disposal to other interested individuals or organisations is considered. In cases in which an arrangement for the exchange, gift or sale of the item is not being made with an individual museum or collecting institution, the collections community at large will be advised of the intention to dispose of the item. A period of at least two months will be allowed for an interest in acquiring the material to be expressed.

Any profits derived from the disposal of items will be applied for the benefit of collections.

Destructive Analysis

The Museum recognises that some items may be more valuable for increasing knowledge in a particular area through destructive analysis. The sampling of biological material for genetic research, for example, often calls for the destruction or partial destruction of zoological specimens. These samples are then deposited in the Australian Biological Tissue Collection and are made available for research, sale or exchange to other research and collecting institutions. There is therefore the need to manage collections which, by their very nature, are designed for destruction or exchange. In general the principles for destructive analysis will be guided by those developed for deaccession and disposal. To these may be added the following:

- In general, applications to destroy or damage accessioned collection items must be made in writing to the Director, setting out the purpose of the proposed research and qualifications and experience of the researcher. Specific details pertaining to destructive analysis according to each collection are described in Part 2,
- Only bone fide research workers of high repute will be supplied with material for destructive research. Such workers may, however, supervise a junior colleague in carrying out the research,
- Unique items must not be totally destroyed and only in exceptional cases may parts be removed for destructive research.

13 Policy review

The South Australian Museum will review its collections policy at least every five years. The next review to be presented to the Board will be in 2014.

16 This will normally be through an announcement on the Collections Access Network www.can.org.au
For each collection discipline, as defined in Part 2 of this policy, the collections strategies and action plans will be reviewed and updated annually by collections staff.