

South Australian Museum

Collection Management Plan

2026
-2030

Care for and share our collections



Government
of South Australia



SOUTH
AUSTRALIAN
MUSEUM



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1. Purpose and scope

The Collection Management Plan (CMP) sets out how the South Australian Museum (the Museum) will develop, document, preserve and provide access to the state research infrastructure comprised by the Museum's collections over the next four years.

It translates the Museum's strategic plan and statutory responsibilities into a prioritised, risk-based program of work for the development, management, preservation and access to this research infrastructure.

A central priority of the South Australian Museum Strategic Plan 2025-2030 is "Care for and share our collections". This priority is supported by four objectives and three outcomes. The CMP gives effect to these commitments by setting clear, staged, actions for the care, documentation, governance and access to our research infrastructure.

The scope of this CMP includes:

- All collection areas held by the Museum
- Physical and digital collections
- Associated archives, library and research collections
- Governance, consent and ethical frameworks
- Digitisation and data quality
- Storage, care and sustainability
- Access and partnerships
- Engagement with communities connected to the Museum's collections.





2. Functions under the South Australian Museum Act

Under the *South Australian Museum Act 1976*, the Board is responsible for the care and management of the Museum and its collections. The Act establishes the Board's functions, which include accumulating and caring for objects and specimens of scientific or historical interest, classifying and managing associated data, promoting research, disseminating information, and advising the Minister on matters relating to research and collections.

This legislative framework places the State Collection as a public asset. It places responsibility on the Museum to accumulate, care for and manage material of scientific and historical interest for the long term.

While the Museum holds nationally and internationally significant collections, its legislative responsibilities anchor the State Collection within South Australia. The CMP gives effect to these statutory functions by setting out how the Museum will care for, document and make accessible material of scientific and historical interest in a consistent and defensible way.

3. State Collection overview

The Museum holds one of the largest and most significant pieces of research infrastructure in Australia, comprising natural science and cultural collections. It is irreplaceable public infrastructure, the foundation on which the Museum's research is built and the primary evidence base for environmental management, cultural authority, heritage protection and public understanding across South Australia.

The collection is not a passive store of objects and specimens. It is a living record of more than 500 million years of environmental change, of the species and ecosystems that have shaped this continent, and of the cultures, Knowledges, languages and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities across Australia and the Pacific. Once lost, this record cannot be rebuilt.

Museum collections are subject to significant long term and short-term pressures. In the long term, the Museum holds collections and expertise that require sustained, ongoing investment. Long-term taxonomic and systematics work cannot be paused and resumed. Cultural relationships take years to build. Baseline environmental data only has value if it is continuous.

In the short term, digital technologies are transforming how collections can be shared and used, while heritage, provenance, repatriation and restitution are now central to museum legitimacy. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, collections may hold cultural knowledge, ancestral connection, family history, ceremony, language, material practice, memory and obligations to Country. Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and access to these collections may be cultural, ceremonial, familial, educational or connected to community responsibility. Access is central to the Museum's purpose.

In a digital age, the collections are also used directly as research infrastructure. Records, images, metadata, genomic material, cultural information and collection data can be accessed, interpreted and reused by people who may never visit the Museum. This extends the Museum's reach, but it also increases its responsibilities. Digital access must be accurate, ethical, culturally governed and designed for use.

South Australia's policy priorities consistently signal the importance of research capability, minerals and environmental knowledge, STEM skills, cultural authority and truth-telling. The State Collection is directly relevant to all of these. It underpins minerals prospectivity through geological and geochemical reference collections. It supports the environmental monitoring and biodiversity data on which landscape management and biosecurity depend. It contributes to STEM education and public scientific literacy. And it holds cultural collections central to truth-telling and the ongoing work of repatriation and reconciliation. Caring for the collection is not separate from these priorities. It is part of how South Australia builds the knowledge infrastructure its future requires.

Our collections are a permanent public asset

The collection, the Museum's research programs, and its public engagement work as an integrated system.

Collections give research its foundation. Research generates knowledge that gives collections meaning, context and value. Engagement is how that knowledge reaches communities, educators, government and industry.

Each depends on the others. Investment in the collection is investment in all three.

The collection spans:

- **Aboriginal Cultures:** the most comprehensive reference collection of Australian Aboriginal material culture in the world.
- **World Cultures:** documenting global cultural diversity, particularly across the Pacific.
- **Archives and Library:** recording 165 years of research and institutional history and Aboriginal history and culture.
- **Natural Sciences:** including terrestrial and marine invertebrates, vertebrates, biological tissues, palaeontology and subfossils, mineralogy and meteorites.
- **Archaeology:** documenting past human societies through material evidence and cultural landscapes.
- **Australian Polar Collection:** linking South Australia to Antarctic and hot desert exploration.

Together these collections comprise millions of specimens and objects, supported by extensive archival and digital records. Many holdings are nationally and globally significant. They include internationally recognised Ediacaran fossils, one of the world's most important entomology collections, Australia's most significant biological tissue, meteorite, tektite and opal collections, and a biological database holding records of nearly 40,000 species found nowhere else.

The collections underpin research, education, public programs and community engagement. They are used by scientists, students, communities, policymakers and the public, both within South Australia, nationally and internationally.

The scale and diversity of the collections are considerable strengths. They also create complexity in care, documentation, governance and access, requiring clear priorities and sustained investment.

4. Collections as living records

Collections in the Museum's care are living records. They provide records of species, ecosystems, climates, cultures, technologies, materials, stories and relationships to place. They enable research and public understanding because they carry context across time.

Their value depends on care, documentation, access, interpretation and trust. The Museum will steward them in ways that support research, cultural authority, community access, repatriation, restitution, environmental decision-making and public learning.

The Museum does not treat custody as ownership. It recognises that legal responsibility, cultural authority and community connection may sit in different places, and that ethical collection care must make space for this.

As a publicly funded institution, the Museum has a responsibility to contribute to cultural vitality, social equity and wellbeing, ecological responsibility, economic resilience, and trusted knowledge. These are not separate outcomes. They are connected: cultural authority shapes environmental care; digital access supports research and education; collections data informs public policy and industry; and public understanding builds the capability South Australia needs for the future.



5. Current-state analysis

The collections are strong but uneven in documentation maturity, governance clarity, preservation stability and storage capacity. In some areas, documentation is robust, and governance is clear. In others, legacy backlogs, fragmented datasets and incomplete provenance limit confidence and usability. Storage capacity is under pressure in several collection areas, and material remains dispersed across multiple sites, creating inefficiencies for access and risk for material handling and maintenance.

Many of these challenges reflect the Museum's long history. Over 165 years, collecting practices, documentation standards and systems have evolved. As a result, cataloguing standards vary across historical acquisitions, some collections carry significant registration and documentation backlogs, and metadata is not consistently integrated. In high-volume areas, staff capacity to address this backlog is stretched or non-existent. Infrastructure in some specialist environments needs replacing to properly manage the collections. Additionally, collection digitisation has often been driven by opportunity rather than clear priority.

Risk management is therefore a central component of this plan. The CMP establishes a framework to identify and address preservation, documentation, governance and access risks across the collection in a systematic and prioritised manner.

At the same time, there are strong foundations to build from:

- Recent registration and rehousing work linked to the Cultural Institutions Storage Facility has strengthened visibility and control in key areas.
- Research programs remain active and closely connected to collections.
- Local, national and international partnerships are well established.
- The Museum has deep experience in community engagement and repatriation.
- Collections are supported by dedicated and experienced collection managers, technical staff and specialist conservation colleagues.

This CMP recognises that not all collections can be lifted at once. It focuses first on stabilising data and governance foundations, addressing high-risk and high-value material, aligning digitisation with impact, improving storage sustainability, and strengthening statewide access and community-led partnerships.

6. Our Collections history, truth-telling and looking forward

The Museum recognises that its history includes collecting practices that do not reflect the values and expectations of the communities it serves today. We acknowledge the impact this has had, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Indigenous communities.

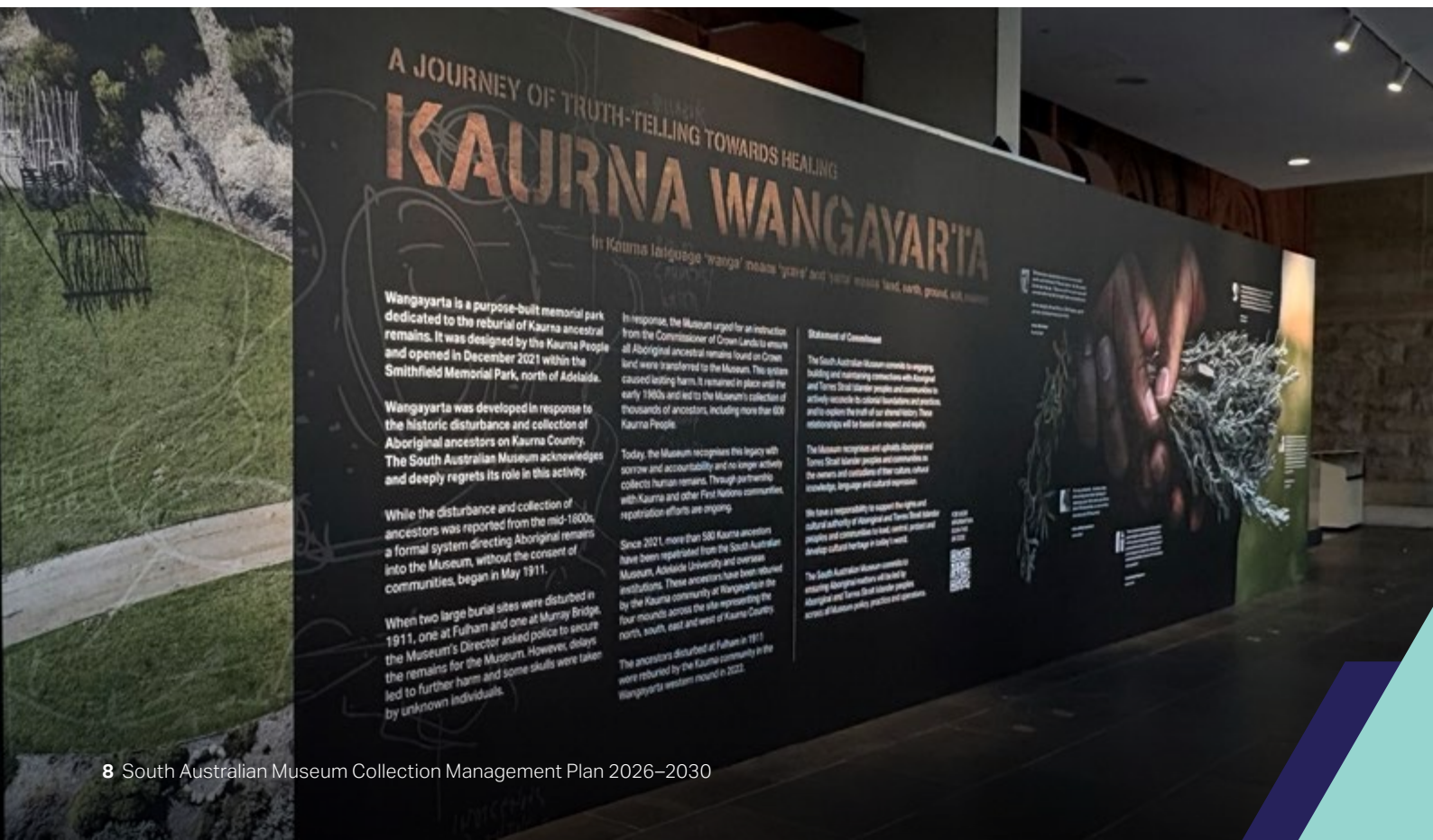
Many items in the collections relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were procured in ways that communities did not consent to and would not consent to today. Truth-telling requires us to acknowledge this directly, and to recognise that many communities have never ceded the right to their objects and do not consider them to be the Museum's.

The Museum has begun to address this history through commitments to equity and reconciliation. This is represented by efforts to reposition the Museum as a place for cultural connection and regeneration and more recently the repatriation of Aboriginal Ancestors and cultural collections to Country.

The Museum will continue this work through repatriation, provenance and restitution research, stronger relationships with communities, and a South Australian approach to truth-telling that is rigorous, accountable and shaped with those whose histories and heritage are involved.

This history shapes how we work now. Our research and care of the collections are grounded in respect, partnership and cultural authority, and support the ongoing strength and continuity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and culture.

We will build on this grounding by strengthening provenance research, confronting harmful or incomplete records, supporting repatriation and restitution, and working with communities to determine how histories, collections and Knowledges should be cared for, described and shared.



7. Relationship to the Research Strategy

Under the *South Australian Museum Act 1976*, research is a primary purpose of the Museum, alongside information dissemination and public understanding. The Museum's research capability constitutes one of South Australia's largest and most significant established research infrastructure facilities. The State Collection is a core component of this research infrastructure.

The CMP and the Research Strategy are complementary but mutually impacting documents. The Research Strategy sets out where the Museum will focus its research effort and why. The CMP sets out how the collections that underpin that effort will be cared for, documented and made accessible.

Neither document is a precondition for the other, but they mutually impact because the condition and nature of the collections directly affect research priorities, and the Museum's research directly affects which collections need the most attention.





8. Principles guiding the Collection Management Plan

The Museum will be guided by six principles. These principles are shared with the Research Strategy and apply across both documents.

Impact

Research and collections activity must be designed for use: by communities, government, researchers, educators, industry, visitors and future generations.

Custodianship with authority

The Museum recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges are intimately bound with how the collections came to be held, how they are understood today, and what they can contribute to research, conservation, education and public understanding. We acknowledge that we hold these collections in trust and on behalf of First Nations communities, and we recognise the authority, rights and responsibilities of communities connected to them.

We will ensure digital access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections is governed by cultural authority, consent, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), appropriate language, community-defined access conditions, and the removal or contextualisation of harmful historic descriptions.

We will support repatriation, provenance and restitution research as an essential part of the Museum's responsibility and future legitimacy.

We will continue work toward joint custodianship arrangements where communities request them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority

We will strengthen governance and decision-making across all research and collection decisions, with shared expectations around consent, access, authorship, attribution, benefit and long-term care of knowledge. These arrangements give weight to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and material, recognising the cultural authority, community responsibilities and statutory obligations attached to them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority must be considered in research design, collection care, access, digitisation, interpretation, governance, staffing, partnerships and measures of success.

Ethical digital access

Digitisation will address metadata, language, search, consent, ICIP, cultural permissions, data quality, harmful historic records, AI-readiness and appropriate access conditions.

Partnership as a way of working

The Museum's impact depends on durable partnerships with communities, government, universities, industry, schools, cultural organisations, conservation partners and national research infrastructure.

Place-based and interdisciplinary practice

The Museum will bring disciplines together around places, collections, questions and communities.

9. Business as usual and core collection services

The CMP encompasses both strategic uplift programs and core collection services. The Museum's legislative functions require ongoing provision of access, advice, loans, research support and public engagement. These activities are central to "Care for and share our collections."

Business as usual (BAU) collection services include:

- Provision of on-site access to First Nations communities, bona fide researchers, and students.
- Preparation and management of loans (incoming and outgoing).
- Responding to collection-related enquiries.
- Identification and advisory services.
- Public engagement, exhibition support and media requests.
- Routine condition monitoring and environmental management.

- Donation and acquisition assessments.
- Registration, cataloguing and documentation maintenance.
- Preventive conservation and storage management.
- Remedial conservation treatment.
- Collection movement and location control.
- Respectful facilitation of community-led repatriation of cultural material and ancestors.

These activities will be formally recognised within work plans and time allocation models. CMP delivery will not displace core collection services. Instead, BAU activity will be structured, measured and integrated within the CMP framework. BAU activity is recognised as core delivery, not residual work.

Core collection service metrics (reported annually)

Research visits supported and location of visitors (national and international).

Items loaned, requests serviced, and community, research, government and industry access (including cultural and ceremonial access not classified as research).

Collection enquiries and response time.

Public engagement contributions.

Proportion of collection management time allocated to core services.

Artlab hours of service (preventive, disaster preparedness, exhibition/loans, remedial treatment).

Honorary, volunteer and research associate contribution, measured in hours and across collection areas.

Records digitised and discoverable, including specimens and objects with publishable metadata, images, 3D, genomic or cultural-context data, and the proportion of each collection that is digitally accessible.

Collection care coverage, measured as the proportion of each collection that has received documented preventive care, condition assessment or remedial conservation within a defined period.



10. Delivery

The Museum's Strategic Plan 2025-2030 identifies 'Care for and share our collections' as a core organisational priority supported by four objectives and three outcomes.

The CMP delivers this priority through seven focused programs of work. These programs consolidate themes identified through staff consultation and workshops into areas that can be realistically delivered over four years.

The seven programs are:

1. Collection development and strategic acquisition
2. Collection data standardisation and targeted uplift
3. Targeted digitisation
4. Governance, consent and ethical practice
5. Collection preservation and risk reduction
6. Statewide access and partnerships
7. Community-led collections and research partnerships

Delivery of the CMP is embedded within the Museum's existing leadership and management structure. A Responsible, Accountable, Supportive, Consulted, and Informed (RASCI) matrix clarifies accountability and responsibility for each priority program.

Delivery of the CMP will also align with the Museum's Research Strategy to ensure that collection management priorities support and enable current and emerging research programs.

Progress against the agreed success measures will be reviewed annually and reported quarterly to the Executive and Board. Where risk, resourcing or strategic priorities change, sequencing of actions may be adjusted with Executive endorsement.

The CMP is intended to guide day-to-day decision making. It informs prioritisation, allocation of staff time and the management of trade-offs across collection activities.



Images

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Page 8	<i>A Journey Towards Healing: Kurna Wangayarta</i> display, South Australian Museum
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