

THE PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS: A MUSEUM PERSPECTIVE

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There is a popular public myth that museums contain basements with insatiable appetites. Once an item enters the doors of a museum it is consumed by the basement, never to see the light of day. To researchers who have tried to find items in, or information about, collections or who have ever attempted to relocate items they have deposited in collections there may seem to be an element of truth to this myth (e.g. Sturtevant 1969). Until recently museums in Australia have suffered acute shortages in staff, finance, space and facilities and these deficiencies are often cited as causes for the poor condition of, amongst other things, archaeological collections.

However, the condition of museum collections cannot be attributed to these shortcomings alone. The perceptions that some archaeologists may hold of the role and function of museums may contribute to the chaos of museum collections. This article identifies and discusses the consequences of these problems and outlines new procedures the Queensland Museum has implemented to more effectively fulfil its role as the official repository for archaeological collections under Section 37(2) of the recently promulgated *Cultural Record (Landscapes Queensland and Queensland Estate) Act*.

Twenty years ago much of the small amount of archaeological work in Queensland was done by the Museum and a large proportion of the collections it acquired at this time were as a result of Museum initiated work. As a consequence the Museum had almost total control over what was collected. Today, although the museum undertakes a greater amount of archaeological research than it did twenty years ago, it is a much smaller proportion of the total amount of work being undertaken

throughout Queensland, leading to only about 5% of collection acquisition. Donors external to the museum, such as university researchers and environmental impact consultants now dominate. As a result the role of the Museum has changed from that of a predominantly active collector to a (largely) passive repository and collection manager.

This has been further reinforced through the designation, in 1971, of the museum as the official repository for archaeological collections from Aboriginal sites in Queensland. From that time until early 1988 it issued 691 Site Collection numbers. However, lodgement of collections and data relating to these collections has relied largely on the goodwill of the depositors. The result has been that basic data (location, site name, date of excavation etc.) has been received for only 32% of the site numbers allocated. Copies of field notes or an adequate explanation of the collection process have been received for only 22% and photographic records for only 4%. Only 10% of researchers have discussed these matters with museum staff prior to undertaking fieldwork.

These statistics indicate that there is little recognition of the fact that the organisation, documentation and deposition of collections with a museum is an extension of the process of site management. Failure by researchers to organise, document and pack collections adequately is as much an archaeological sin as not backfilling a site. If future researchers cannot examine, sort out or identify particular specimens within a collection there seems little use in having stored that collection in the first place. Further, there is a general failure to realise that the storage of archaeological objects involves the storage of the information relating to them, without which the collections are virtually useless.

Irrespective of the amount of documentation accompanying a collection, traditional museum management practices in the past were inefficient, time consuming and duplicated much of the work already done by the depositor. The traditional approach to the management of archaeological collections in the Queensland Museum was one ultimately derived from the management of biological specimens further constrained by limited storage facilities. After receiving a collection from a donor (in various packages ranging from paper bags and newspaper to shoeboxes, tea chests and suitcases) the curator and staff (if any) would (i) assign the site a number and record site details (if any) on a separate cover sheet (ii) assign each specimen a sub-number and register specimens individually or in small groups (often using a different nomenclature to that of the donor), (iii) assign them a cupboard or shelf space, (iv) reorganise the collection in cupboard drawers (v) create two cards for each sub-number for a card index system

The consequence which would result from maintaining the 'traditional' approach can be illustrated by using as an example the Colless Creek cave excavation in northwestern Queensland, excavated by Dr. P. Hughes (University of Papua New Guinea) and P. Hiscock (University of Queensland) and currently being analysed by Hiscock. The Colless Creek cave has a history of 30,000 years or more (Hiscock 1984; Magee and Hughes 1982). It has one of the most dense concentrations of artefacts and associated archaeological material of any excavated site in Australia. From an excavation of approximately 10% of the deposit an estimated 250,000 artefacts, 500,000 non-diagnostic stone pieces, 250 bulk samples of bone, charcoal and other material has been recovered - over three tons in all (P. Hiscock, University of Queensland, pers. comm.). The consequent impact upon time, space, cost and growth be illustrated in the following ways.

Time: Reynolds (1981), in a discussion concerning the time taken to process ethnographic specimens estimated that 5 minutes is required for the entry of an object in an accession register and the allocation of numbers, assuming that a technician has unpacked and prepared the collection, numbered the object and provided shelf space; a process taking 10 minutes. In addition to this Reynolds suggests that the cataloguing process would take an additional 45 minutes per object. Given that the treatment of archaeological specimens is somewhat different from that of ethnographic items, the packing and preparation, identification, cataloguing and carding of an archaeological specimen can be estimated at about 15 minutes per object.

If only the bulk samples, cores, retouched flakes and flaked pieces (approx. 3%) of the Colless Creek collection were registered in this 'traditional' way, it would take approximately three person years to be effectively organised.

Space: The Queensland Museum Archaeology collections, numbering approximately 50,000 specimens, were housed in the old Queensland Museum in drawers in 8 wooden cabinets with a total storage capacity of about 22m³. The Colless Creek collection, if housed in this manner, would have taken up approximately 5 times this space, or 92m³. When transferred to the new Queensland Museum and housed in the traditional way it would take up approximately 35% of the new storage allocated to archaeology collections.

Cost: A cubic metre of storage space (excluding establishment costs such as cupboards, compactus, boxes etc.) in the new museum costs approximately \$1,600. The 92m³ allocated to the Colless Creek Collection under this system would cost \$147,200 in space alone.

Growth: Colless Creek is only one of 691 sites for which site registration numbers have been issued in Queensland over the last 15 years. Between 1969 and 1979, only 265 'S' numbers were issued, but between 1980 and 1986 there were 426. It is clear that archaeology in Queensland is undergoing rapid development with an exponential growth in the numbers of items deposited in the collection. It is estimated that within the next five years at least two million items will be added to the collection.

The impact of the rapid development of Archaeology in Queensland necessitated a review of collection management procedures and policies if the Museum is to be an effective repository for archaeological collections.

Three choices of action are:

- i) either restrictions are placed on the amount of material that is collected or deposited by researchers; or
- ii) more stringent guidelines are applied to researchers regarding their role in the deposition of archaeological material in the museum; or
- iii) a combination of both.

The second is seen as the appropriate choice. The Queensland Museum has formulated a policy and guidelines for the deposition of archaeological collections with the Museum. If prospective depositors wish to deposit collections with the Museum they must comply with these guidelines (Robins and Agnew 1984). In return

for having collections stored in optimum conditions in perpetuity, researchers must organise their collections and provide data to a standard acceptable to the Museum.

The following Policy has now been implemented:

1. Collections made under the Provisions of the *Cultural Record (Landscapes Queensland and Queensland Estate) Act* will be registered with the Queensland Museum and fall within the provisions of the *Queensland Museum Act 1970-79*.
2. The Museum will not dispose of any archaeological material without the prior advice and consent of the Minister for Community Services.
3. Collections must be registered by depositors using the Museum's registration system on forms supplied by the Museum.
4. Collections should be organised and stored in the manner defined by the Museum. Collections not organised in the appropriate way will not be accepted by the Museum.
5. In addition to documentation submitted to the Archaeology Branch, Department of Community Services and Ethnic Affairs copies of documentation relating to the collection, including, where possible, publications, theses, field notes, summaries of field methods and photographs, should accompany the collection. The museum will not accept collections that do not have adequate documentation.
6. The Museum will only accept complete collections.
7. After formal acceptance with the Queensland Museum, individual collections will only be divided and/or housed at separate locations under circumstances determined by the Museum.
8. After formal acceptance with the Queensland Museum, examination of objects or samples using destructive techniques, must only be undertaken with the approval of the Queensland Museum.
9. Complete collections may be housed with other institutions. Such collections will be considered on loan which will be subject to annual renewal. However, the collections must be organised and stored in a manner acceptable to the Museum. The collections must be registered into the Museum's system. A copy of the information associated with such a collection must be lodged with the Queensland Museum in the prescribed manner.
10. Researchers and contract archaeologists should consult with the museum prior to undertaking field work. Depositors will be informed of the specific details of the Museum's documentation and storage systems and of the requirements of depositors.

Although the Museum is the official repository for collections, it can choose whether or not to accept collections. It is not necessary that all archaeological collections be stored at the Museum and provided they can meet basic management requirements other institutions and bodies will be encouraged to retain collections.

To initiate the process, applicants for permission to collect (excavation or surface collection) under the *Cultural Record (Landscapes Queensland and Queensland Estate) Act* will be required to contact the Anthropology and Archaeology Section, Queensland Museum. The curator or collection manager will then advise the applicant of the Museum requirements and recommend sampling and storage procedures. On completion of the collection a Museum number will be allocated to the researcher for each site a collection has been made from. The researcher will be given registration sheets in which they will register items or groups of items according to the manner in which the collection was made and subsequently analysed. Where practicable collections will be packed (and labelled) in standard sized storage boxes according to the manner in which they are registered. The storage boxes can be purchased from the museum.

This approach has a number of advantages from the Museum's point of view. It will dramatically reduce storage space for each collection. The Colless Creek Collection will be able to be stored in approximately 110 boxes taking up 23.4m³ or 9.2% of the storage space allocated for the new Museum at a space cost of \$37,000. This represents a space saving of 69m³ at a space cost of \$110,000 over the traditional method.

The number of person hours needed to curate the collection will be reduced. The curator or collection manager's role will be to check the information, organise the data into the data retrieval system, allocate space for the collection and ensure its proper management (including easy access for future research). This process will ensure that there is no unnecessary duplication of effort and it will reduce the number of errors in the system. Confusion over terminology will not be compounded. Furthermore, the quality and conformity of data will be ensured. Most importantly the system will ensure that there is a single source for collection information in Queensland and it will ensure that collections will be adequately stored and documented.

The system does have important implications for the archaeologist. Packing collections may entail additional costs in time and money. While the expense for small collections is minimal, large collections may be expensive to pack and this cost should be borne in mind when planning research. The time taken to organise and document collections will take longer and this factor should also be accounted for in research planning. Archaeologists will have to seriously evaluate the amount of excavation or collection they do in the future. Sampling strategies should be contemplated to ensure that where possible, small representative samples of material are retained to avoid large 'catch all' collections and their potential high cost, low benefit. However, the organisation of storage and the documentation of the collection for Museum purposes should be a simple and logical extension of the site recording and excavation procedures. Data relating to the collection will then be stored in a convenient and retrievable data base system useful for both Museum management and research.

In summary, museum registration and storage systems are an essential and integral part of site management and documentation. Researchers have as much professional responsibility to their collections as they have to the sites they excavate or the authority to whom they are legally responsible.

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