

Introduction

National

Conservation

and

Preservation

Policy

for

Movable

Cultural Ministers Council

Cultural

Heritage Collections Committee

Heritage

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Introduction

Movable cultural heritage is an important element in the lives of all Australians. It is evidence of the cultural richness and diversity of Australian people, past and present. It helps us define who we are.

This heritage includes the intangible—what is felt, known and experienced. Increasingly these traditions, customs and habits are recorded and documented in photographs, films, tapes and disks. It also includes the tangible—such as bark paintings and works of art, books and manuscripts, aircraft and steam engines, natural history specimens and all manner of large and small objects relating to great events as well as everyday lives.

Movable cultural heritage is in the care of many individuals and organisations. The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments are custodians of much of this heritage. Governments therefore play a key role in promoting access to this heritage as well as its conservation and preservation.

The need for a national conservation policy was recommended in the Anderson Report prepared for an inter-governmental committee in 1993. This policy was prepared, after wide public consultation, by the Heritage Collections Committee and its Conservation Working Party—bodies established under the auspices of the Cultural Ministers Council which represents Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments.

The policy provides a national framework for governments, the private, community and non-government sectors, as well as individuals and organisations involved in the care of movable cultural heritage.

Fundamental issues related to the conservation and preservation of, and access to, Australia's movable cultural heritage are addressed in the policy, including:

- cultural diversity;
- understanding the significance of this heritage;
- coordination;
- skills development, education and training; and
- research.

The policy is intended to guide activities at the local and national level, and establishes a basis for the development of strategies and actions. It has been endorsed by the Cultural Ministers Council and reflects a spirit of cooperation between governments and the private, community and non-government sector.

This publication also provides an overview of related policies and some key background issues to promote a better understanding of the policy.



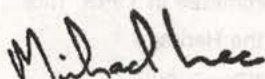
One important concept related to the policy is the Distributed National Collection. The Collection is the sum of all movable cultural heritage of significance to the nation, including cultural heritage collections and objects which are in the custody of a wide range of organisations and individuals. A national database is being developed to identify and promote access to the Collection. The Distributed National Collection provides a focus for strategies and actions being developed in accordance with the policy.

Further information about the policy is available from:

Secretary
Cultural Ministers Council
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

The policy statements are not listed in a priority order.

On behalf of the Council, I commend the policy and background information to all Australians.



Michael Lee
Chair
Cultural Ministers Council
September 1995

National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage

Policy Statements

Policy Statement 1

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments affirm the importance of Australia's movable cultural heritage to the life and well-being of the people of Australia.

Policy Statement 2

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments acknowledge the diversity of cultures of the Australian people which should be reflected in the definition and identification of movable cultural heritage.

This diversity includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, as well as the range of cultures reflecting the history of immigration which has brought people from many places to Australia.

Policy Statement 3

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need to define the significance of movable cultural heritage as a way of guiding conservation and preservation strategies and actions.

Developing general criteria and defining the significance of movable cultural heritage will provide a sound basis for a range of management decisions related to conservation, preservation and access. It will also facilitate the delivery of targeted programs, such as local or national programs.

Policy Statement 4

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need to conserve and preserve Australia's movable cultural heritage.

The conservation and preservation of Australia's movable cultural heritage will be achieved by a variety and combination of means including: the provision of education and awareness programs; collection management planning; the development and implementation of standards, policy and legislation; the availability of professional training and development; research; the provision of appropriate storage and display environments; the treatment of vulnerable and endangered material; and reproduction.

While the conservation and preservation of movable cultural heritage frequently involves difficult issues, the heritage created using relatively recent electronic technology poses a new set of challenges.



Policy Statement 5

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the important right of the Australian people to have a reasonable and an equitable opportunity of access to their movable cultural heritage, subject to cultural restrictions or sensitivities.

The proposed national database will provide one opportunity for access to information about the Distributed National Collection.

Policy Statement 6

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise that conservation and preservation are essential to provide ongoing access to Australia's movable cultural heritage for current and future generations.

Movable cultural heritage is almost always in a form which will decay over time. Providing access to movable cultural heritage contributes to the processes of decay, sometimes in a very major way. Conservation and preservation extend the life of movable cultural heritage, in some cases indefinitely, and therefore the opportunities for access. This may include reproducing movable cultural heritage. For example, reproducing a manuscript can preserve indefinitely the information it contains while at the same time providing wide opportunities for access for current and future generations.

Policy Statement 7

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need for a coordinated approach involving governments and the private, community and non-government sectors to achieve the improved conservation and preservation of and access to Australia's movable cultural heritage.

Conserving, preserving and providing access to the Distributed National Collection requires a coordinated approach.

Governments alone are not able to achieve these goals. However, both governments and the private, community and non-government sector own the Collection and have resources which can contribute to the achievement of these goals. Coordination, including networks and partnerships between individuals and organisations in governments and the private, community and non-government sector will enhance strategies and actions.

Community and professional organisations concerned with movable cultural heritage can play a special role in establishing

and fostering networks and partnerships which are valuable for coordination.

Policy Statement 8

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need to raise the level of general understanding about Australia's movable cultural heritage to achieve improved conservation, preservation and access.

Improving general understanding, including education within the community is a key factor in achieving the conservation and preservation of Australia's movable cultural heritage. It promotes an appreciation of appropriate conservation and preservation for heritage cared for by individuals. In addition, raising the level of general understanding encourages a broader awareness of the nature, importance and challenges facing Australia's movable cultural heritage.

Policy Statement 9

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need for coordination of community-wide skills development, training and education of those involved in the conservation and preservation of Australia's movable cultural heritage.

Coordinated community-wide skills development, training and education, including the establishment of related standards, is essential to achieving best practice in conservation and preservation. Professional organisations and training providers have a key role to play in this area.

Policy Statement 10

The Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments recognise the need to carry out research related to Australia's movable cultural heritage to achieve improved conservation, preservation and access.

The scale and nature of the problems confronting the conservation and preservation of movable cultural heritage are generally not well understood. Practical and inexpensive solutions are yet to be developed for many problems which are, in many cases, unique to Australia. In addition, new forms of heritage pose new challenges. Research into materials, storage, display, methods and treatments is vital to developing both better and new solutions to ensure a future for Australia's movable cultural heritage.

Overview of related policies

National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage

Background information

General

The preparation of the National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage is an integral part of the National Conservation Program, established under the auspices of the Cultural Ministers Council. The Program aims to enhance the conservation and preservation of Australia's movable cultural heritage, in the form of the Distributed National Collection, for current and future generations.

The Commonwealth's general commitment to movable cultural heritage takes a number of forms. *Creative Nation*, the Commonwealth Cultural Policy (1994), notes in general terms the need for conservation and preservation of Australia's movable and intangible heritage (p.75 and p.80). The *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* is another general expression of commitment to movable cultural heritage, in this case controlling its export.

At the State and Territory Government level, the process of developing general policies has begun in several cases. For example, in South Australia and Victoria, State preservation policies have been drafted for public institutions across all sectors. In the case of South Australia, the policy has been endorsed by the government.

Non-government organisations have also considered the issue of general policy for movable cultural heritage. In November 1993 the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) held a seminar to explore the issues associated with developing conservation policy and strategic systems to manage the Distributed National Collection. A major outcome was the recognition that a national policy is the cornerstone of a national program.

While the development of a National Policy is focussed on the situation in Australia, it will also



be of interest and value to countries in the region and at a broader international level. The Policy will serve as an example for other countries and it will form part of the range of products and services available for export.

The organisations and individuals involved in conserving, preserving and providing access to Australia's movable cultural heritage portray a diversity of approaches. This diversity is reflected in the definition of key concepts such as culture, movable cultural heritage and significance. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the range of definitions of such concepts and further information may be found in the consultant's report prepared in the development of the Policy (University of Melbourne Conservation Service 1994).

Library and Archive Sector

Towards Federation 2001, Linking Australians and their Heritage (Final Report 1993) has provided a platform for cross-sectoral collaboration between libraries, archives and the National Film and Sound Archive.

'The mission for the Conference process was seen as being to enable Australians to have the maximum possible bibliographical and physical access to their recorded documentary heritage by the year 2001; and it was planned that the conference would identify present barriers to access to Australia's documentary heritage, and establish initiatives and mechanisms which would enable the mission to be accomplished by the Centenary of Australia's Federation.' (p.vi)

Towards Federation 2001 formulated fourteen preservation resolutions (Final Report 1993, pp.46-48) which identified the major library and information conservation and preservation issues, linking them with those developed internationally. These resolutions aim to '...identify a cooperative national framework of preservation activities covering national, state and local activities' (p.46 TG2).

Major State Libraries and Archives have in-house conservation and preservation policies which are linked to legislation and corporate plans. These reflect local political and financial conditions, as well as the conservation and preservation requirements of their own collections.

Australian Archives has produced a well-defined policy *The Custody and Preservation Program of the Australian Archives* (1994) which is linked to the Archives Act. The thrust of this policy is to improve efficiency and effectiveness in conservation and preservation of records. The National Film and Sound Archive's conservation and preservation policy (1993) seeks '...to provide permanent access to the heritage of moving images, sound, associated paper-based documentation materials and artefacts held in the [Archive]' (p.20).

In the process of developing the National Policy, the library and archive sectors made the following key recommendations:

- provide access to Australia's movable cultural heritage as far into the future as possible; and
- ensure the conservation and preservation of the existing and future movable cultural heritage resources of Australia.

There was also strong and unanimous support for infrastructure to support a national conservation and preservation policy.

Museum Sector

Many museums have developed conservation and preservation policies, signalling a growing awareness of the need to plan and commit specific resources to conservation.

One particular issue facing many museums is the development of appropriate policies regarding the movable cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It is recognised as critically important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be involved in the development of policy and strategies for the conservation and preservation of movable cultural heritage.

The Council of Australian Museum Associations' (now Museums Australia) policy *Previous Possessions/New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (1993) and the Museum of Victoria's policy document *Management of Secret/Sacred and Sensitive Material* are examples of development in this area. Generally relevant legislation or reports include the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986*, the Findings of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and the *Native Title Act 1994*.

Objects, Places and the Cultural Environment

Conservation and preservation for movable cultural heritage which is part of a culturally significant place and the cultural environment generally are covered by a number of specific Acts, or will be by proposed legislation, as well as non-legislative but widely accepted guidelines. This applies to Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and historic places. The protection of places, which is also the basis for protection of this movable cultural heritage, is a major and separate issue to the development of the Policy.

Legislation and guidelines for the protection of movable cultural heritage which is part of a place include: the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975*; *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*; the Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter) and associated guidelines; State and Territory legislation; and the Draft Collections Management Policy of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales.

The development by the Australian Heritage Commission of the Register of the National Estate provides a useful model for the development of the Distributed National Collection.

Overview of key issues

Cultural Diversity

Collections reflecting Australia's diverse cultures are not well represented in institutions however, better collections exist at community or individual levels. The publication, *A plan for cultural heritage institutions to reflect Australia's cultural diversity* (1991) examined collecting policies of institutions and issues of access, representation, collection, display and consultation with community groups. Collecting institutions are still in the initial stage of responding to this plan.

Cultural diversity issues include: a critical concern about significance and diversity; the role of intangible heritage; cultural reclamation and development; the private and public interest in this heritage, including its appropriate location and care; cultural restrictions and sensitivities, especially related to access; and acknowledging the desire of many individuals and communities to retain objects and collections within their own immediate access and care.

The Commonwealth Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs deals directly with cultural diversity matters. The Office, in turn, funds the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia. Extracts from the Federation's Arts, Culture and Heritage Policy of particular relevance to the conservation and preservation of movable cultural heritage are:

'As the community cultural development mechanism of [the Federation], the Arts Culture and Heritage Network will:

- 1.1 Lead, advocate and facilitate the promotion of community cultural conservation, cultural continuity and cultural democracy in a multicultural Australia;

The development of a National Policy Framework for Arts, Culture and Heritage in a Multicultural Australia will:

- 3.1 Identify, preserve and make accessible the oral, written and tangible documentary heritage of Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds;
- 3.2 Assist in the assessment of significance, identification, preservation presentation and accessibility of heritage collections of Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds;
- 3.4 Recognise, preserve and disseminate folklife and other intangible aspects of heritage as an integral part of Australia's multicultural life that reflects and represents the beliefs, practices and traditions of every strata and section of Australian society;
- 3.5 Assist and participate in the development of appropriate criteria of significance, methodologies and a community user-guide for the nomination of places of significance to be preserved and also work towards community education and interpretation;
- 3.11 Promote and assist in the identification, preservation and continuation of language heritage of Australia.'

The Office of Multicultural Affairs commissioned the publication *Heritage Curricula and Cultural Diversity* (Galla 1993).

Relevant recommendations include:

3. That the Cultural Ministers Council, through the federal, state and territory governments, [the Council of Australian Museum Directors] and [Museums Australia], and representative indigenous and multicultural organisations, establish a working group to consider the in-house approaches of various institutions and develop a national framework...for best policies and practices relating to heritage collections as an implementation mechanism for The Plan.

6. That the Museum Training Taskforce of Arts Training Australia encourage all museum studies and cultural heritage management programs to offer a current issues academic unit encapsulating the specific Australian experiences in the preservation, conservation, continuation, presentation and management of heritage collections in indigenous and multicultural Australia.
8. That state and territory Ethnic Affairs Commissions and Ethnic Community Councils, local government authorities and other appropriate agencies, in conjunction with state and territory departments for arts, establish local Arts, Culture and Heritage Development Groups with the primary objective of developing policies consistent with integrated community cultural development and heritage management.'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage

Museums have particular obligations to conserve and preserve the movable culture heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities and peoples. Collections in Australian museums are relatively small, often fragile and therefore vulnerable (Anderson 1991). It is essential the priority needs of these collections are recognised.

The relevant points raised in *Previous Possessions/New Obligations* (CAMA 1993, items 2.6, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 5) for the Policy are: the focus on consultation and decision making with the informed consent of custodians; acknowledgment of their right to decide who carries out any conservation and preservation work; the acknowledgment that without due process of consultation, objects of a sensitive nature may not undergo a conservation or preservation process despite potential deterioration; and that training custodians in areas of museum practice will assist them in the management of movable cultural heritage.

The Commonwealth Department of Communications and the Arts has recently released two draft publications (received

December 1994): *Guidelines for the Protection, Management and Use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Places*; and *Protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Places*. It is anticipated that the final publications will influence strategies and actions developed in relation to the Policy.

Museums

'The silent, scarcely visible damage to items in Australian museums...' (Piggott 1975) remains at crisis point almost 20 years after the Inquiry on Museums and National Collections.

While it can be argued that there have been significant improvements particularly in the area of training conservators, and within many of the larger museums, recent research has shown that collections in Australian museums are still in a perilous condition (Anderson 1991). Remedial action taken to date has simply been too little. The renaissance experienced by museums since the mid 1970s, and the dramatic growth in the number, range and quality of museums and programs in Australia has compounded the problems associated with the conservation and preservation of collections.

The major portion of the nation's movable cultural heritage is held in State museums including art museums. However, these institutions constitute less than 5% of the total number of organisations caring for movable cultural heritage collections.

While museums continue to collect they have a backlog of heritage in need of treatment. None of these institutions has adequate resources to meet their in-house conservation and preservation needs (Arts Victoria 1991-92). Often those who have responsibility for collections regularly make decisions and handle significant objects although they have not always been trained in preventive conservation.

Within museums the level of expertise in all areas of museum practice varies enormously. Many rely on volunteers to sustain the enterprise and the majority are not trained in preventive conservation. Yet the majority of collections are in

urgent need of conservation. Preventive conservation is not practised universally and there are insufficient resources to address conservation and preservation needs (Museums Association of Australia - NSW 1991).

Another particular issue concerns regional and local collections. It is generally acknowledged that conservation and preservation must be considered a part of overall collection management planning. However, at the regional and local levels there is a tendency for conservation and preservation to be seen in isolation from collection management planning. (Piggott 1975 and Anderson 1991)

Private and Corporate Heritage

Movable cultural heritage in private hands forms part of the Distributed National Collection. It may belong to large multi-national corporations or individuals. The private sector also includes; the creators of culture, including artists; publishers; software publishers; and the media industry.

There is no process to ensure the conservation and preservation of movable cultural heritage held within this sector. One objective of the Policy is to raise the level of awareness of the private sector of conservation and preservation issues.

There are a number of models for community and industry based conservation and preservation programs for movable cultural heritage in private hands. The following groups could provide useful models for extension programs:

Society of Archivists, friends of museums, regional historical societies, genealogical societies, Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material and Museums Australia. Funding programs which may provide useful models include Community Heritage Grants and ESSO Scholarships.

Community-wide Skills Development, Training and Education

With the proliferation of tertiary courses including those training librarians, archivists and curators,



and museum studies and heritage management, there has been an associated increase in preventive conservation studies. The training of conservators at the University of Canberra has built a strong professional base and many of these conservators now teach in tertiary institutions.

The incorporation of lectures on preventive conservation in teaching practical studio arts and crafts skills is still piecemeal and inadequate. Similarly with museum studies courses, preventive conservation is not taught to a significant extent. Programs to ensure a basic level of knowledge are important for all those involved in the care of movable cultural heritage including staff and volunteers.

The use of the Arts Training Australia Competency Standards for Museums and Libraries will be fundamental to the establishment of conservation and preservation courses that reflect the needs of those organisations charged with the care of movable cultural heritage.

The demand for lectures and short courses on conservation and preservation issues by community groups is growing. The model of open learning appears very useful in this area. The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material and various branches of Museums Australia have provided community workshops across the country.

In recent times, the Heritage Collections Committee of the Cultural Ministers Council has coordinated conservation workshops targeted at isolated communities. There is considerable scope for development by rationalising and focussing current efforts.

Glossary

The following key terms or phrases are used in the Policy.

Access: The range of means by which the general community and specific groups and individuals can obtain information and enjoyment about movable cultural heritage. This range includes direct physical access to original heritage, access to reproductions as well as other representations of heritage.

Conservation and Preservation: The combination of these terms reflects the range of approaches to the care of movable cultural heritage in Australia. In general, these terms refer to all actions taken to retain the significance of movable cultural heritage. Such actions may include treatment to retard deterioration, the prevention of damage, and reproduction.

Distributed National Collection: The sum of all movable cultural heritage of significance to the nation, including cultural heritage collections and objects which are in the custody of a wide range of organisations and individuals including governments and the private, community and non-government sector.

Movable cultural heritage: Objects that are of importance for ethnological, archaeological, historical, literary, artistic, scientific or technological reasons.