

WA MUSEUM'S KIMBERLEY COLLECTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

On 5 October 2005, Dr Dawn Casey, the Director of the Western Australian Museum, spoke to the Kimberley Society. The following notes, recorded by Susan Clarkson, convey almost the full content of the talk. A shorter version, covering only the Kimberley content, appears in the Boab Bulletin, June 2006.

Those of us who aspire to build and operate today's museums have a great deal in common. Over and above the sheer volume of hard work, meetings, negotiations, budgets and paperwork, we share the challenge of having to make tough decisions about some extraordinarily complex issues. We also need to take into account high expectations, particularly from Governments (who allocate the funds), academics, friends of the museum, and museum practitioners.

Museums have evolved over a long period from privately held collections to natural history museums and then to the plethora of museums we have today. The 1980s and 1990s saw a considerable shift in museology. Conservation moved from a skill traditionally exercised by craftspeople to a profession dealing with increasingly complex scientific procedures and international environmental standards developed for the preservation of collections.

Research, scholarship, programs and exhibition development, particularly in history museums were transformed by the intellectual and cultural shift towards inclusiveness to reflect the multicultural nature of society. Museums in Canada, United States and Australia began the process of repatriation of Indigenous human remains and secret sacred objects, and some museums in the United Kingdom reluctantly followed.

The mid-90s to the present saw a revolution of museums. With visitor numbers falling, museums started to survey their visitors seriously and made a conscious effort to be more people and child friendly. Economic pressures—brought about by ever-increasing operating costs and the requirements by Governments and Boards of Trustees to run a more cost effective and commercially oriented organization—accelerated this revolution.

The British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum and the Natural History in New York were among the first to realize the advantages of having shops and cafes, not just to improve the visitor experience, but to raise much-needed revenue. The shops were transformed from libraries look-alikes to gift shops, with exclusive merchandise ranging from posters to exquisite jewellery. And don't forget the tote bag for carrying newly purchased museum books and gifts that people take home and keep because it, too, is exclusive. Yet, museum directors who appointed during the 1980s and 1990s without a science or museum background were criticized for

being managers and concentrating on the visitor experience and commercial operations instead of research.

A significant number of new museums have been built around the world. These include: the Canadian Museum of Civilisation, the Jewish History Museum in Berlin, Te Papa in New Zealand, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and the Museum of Melbourne. They were all purpose built with new approaches to architecture and exhibition design. In some cases the architecture reflected the content of the museum. The Canadian Museum of Civilisation reflected Native Canadian Indians' totems and the significance they place on circles. The architecture of both the Jewish Museum of History and the Holocaust Museum emulates the horrific journey taken by the Jews to the death camps.

Museum practitioners internationally were incensed. Common criticism espoused was 'the architecture had subsumed and overshadowed the exhibitions which after all is what a museum is about'. Then there are the curved walls, awkward corners, windows and use of colours other than white.

Can a museum be serious and scholarly if it is full of entertaining features and new technologies? I have been obliged to disagree with my friend Dr Tim Flannery of the South Australian Museum – a museum traditionalist when he claimed that the new 'super museums' had abandoned scholarship and concentrated on superficial entertainment – what he calls 'bells and whistles'. Tim is of course confusing technology, which is simply a communications tool, with content and not applying contemporary museum practice of 'inclusiveness' and 'accessibility' for all visitors, particularly young people.

All museums, as storytellers, should aim to achieve the same for their stories. Museums have an obligation as custodians of the past, but an equal obligation as storytellers – to make the past accessible to all those who actually own it and not just to those who have had the opportunity and access to education.

So apart from cafes and shops how else are museums relevant today? Well, let me remind you of the soul-searching questions history museums in South Africa, Berlin, Vietnam, Canada, New Zealand are asking:

- How is the nation defined?
- Who should be told about its past?
- Who is included in the story, and how?
- How does local experience fit into the national narrative?
- What happens when the community that we call nation does not fully mesh with the territorial entity that we call country?

- Australia is being shaken by a number of fierce debates about issues that run deep and they include.
- Who are we exactly, and how did we get to be this way?
- What sort of people should we allow to join us in this nation continent, and why?
- How many of us should there be?
- What is the proper place of indigenous Australians, and do we owe them special consideration?
- Does what happened to them in the past matter today?
- Is the way we have developed the land a matter for pride in achievement, or is it a slowly emerging environmental catastrophe?

Essentially museums today provide a forum for debate, by offering a reflective space in which people can consider issues in context – against their historic background. We offer comfortable spaces and a stimulus for thought – ‘a safe place for unsafe ideas’, as the museum consultant Elaine Gurian says.

In the terrible days following September 11, many museums proved their worth as civic spaces. The museums of New York did more than offer a physical haven. The Brooklyn, Manhattan and Staten Island children’s museums opened their doors free of charge to families, and offered special programs which enabled children to reflect and express their feelings. Parents and teachers found ways to encourage cultural understanding at a time when children wanted to know – ‘who did it?’ – who were the bad people? They needed someone to explain the terrible instances of blame and hatred they were seeing, directed against other kids at school, or Middle Eastern shop owners.

What makes museums different from a newspaper or a pub, when it comes to the discussion of hot issues, is our contribution to informed debate. Our foundation in scholarship and research enables us to give background information in a way not available to the front page or the soapbox orator. We provide a venue which is ‘safe’ in the sense of calm and comfortable, where the rules of engagement encourage respect for multiple viewpoints. Museums are the new civic space, and in museums, there’s a crucial interplay between intellectual and emotional knowledge, which brings me to the Kimberley.

Through museums hundreds of thousands of Australians are on their way to being better informed, a bit more thoughtful, and better equipped to deal with the claims and counter-claims of national public life. As a museum you do have to challenge or surprise people. You must albeit gently push them beyond the comfortable or the familiar. You have to keep on reminding them that their kind of person, or their experience of life, is not the only one. The way we do it risks the disapproval of

some, but without risk there is no opportunity. Some people may well prefer a world without risk, where everything is fully guaranteed, pleasant, inoffensive, bland. But that's not a world in which you could hope to learn – or to change.

About 33% of the objects registered in the Australian ethnographic collections registers are from the Kimberley – this is some 3035 artefacts made of wood, shell, plant fibre and contemporary textiles, paintings, etc. A representative range is included in Katta Djinoong. Some of the objects currently listed as “no data” are also clearly derived from the Kimberley. There are also several thousand secret/sacred items. Some communities request that the museum stores these on their behalf as they cannot guarantee their security in the community.

It is not possible to say what percentage of the archaeology collections derive from the Kimberley, although there is material from the excavations in various locations as well as stone tools from surface collections. Famous excavated sites include Miriwun (dating back over 18,000 years) and Monsmont, drowned by the rising waters of Lake Argyle.

In addition we have a reasonable large collection of photographs taken during fieldwork by Ian Crawford, particularly focused around Kalumburu between 1964 and 1994, and by Moya Smith in Dampierland (Lombadina area) between 1980 and 1997. Ian and Moya also collected plant samples as part of research into traditional plant use. Currently, Moya is keen to resume fieldwork with the Bardi people from One Arm Point, looking at stone wall fish traps and as part of continuing interest in traditional Kimberley maritime economies. Fieldwork of course is dependent on external funding.

The Department of Terrestrial Vertebrates has had a long involvement in research into the fauna of the Kimberley with projects initiated by the department and cooperative projects with CALM and other groups. Many of the surveys listed below were followed up by several trips later.

- Ord River Survey prior to building the Argyle Dam (Ron Johnson) and many visits from 1972 – 2003
- Price Regent River Reserve – with CALM (Ron Johnstone) 1975
- Mitchell Plateau (Ron Johnstone) many visits from 1973 – 2003
- Rainforest Survey with CALM (Ron Johnstone) 1989
- Gardner and Denison Ranges 1997 (Ron Johnstone)
- Survey of Kimbolton Station, Yampi for Environment Australia – 2000
- Return to Mitchell Plateau to assess changes in presence and abundance of fauna.
- Purnululu with Landscape tour
- Mornington Station with WA Naturalists' Club 2002

- Survey of Kimberley islands to assess the morphological and genetic variation between islands and between islands and the mainland 2003, 2004, 2005
- Possible return to the Ord River to assess changes.
- Study of the frog fauna in Kununurra and area with Alcoa Frogwatch – 2005 ongoing.
- Ord River Region – Ron Johnstone
- Kimberley mangrove surveys – Ron Johnstone

The Museum's Department of Aquatic Zoology has had considerable contact with the Kimberley region over the years. Expeditions have been undertaken to the Rowley Shoals and Buccaneer Archipelago in 1982; Scott Reef and Seringapatam Reef in 1984; Ashmore Reef and Cartier Island in 1986. In 1984 a marine biological survey of the Southern Kimberley was carried by WAM staff together with other institutions. As a consequence of the work carried out and collections made during these non-marine surveys, Dr Alan Solem of the Field Museum in Chicago, largely with USA funding, carried out a number of collecting trips to the Kimberley and published widely on the land snail fauna of that and adjacent regions between 1979 and 1997.

The Mollusc section of the Aquatic Zoology Department has ongoing contact with the Kimberley and its fauna through the work of other government departments. From our experience in that area and the collections of data and specimens made there we are constantly supplying identifications and other data on marine, land and freshwater molluscs (including introduced species and those important to commercial undertakings such as the pearling industry). We also provide such services to anthropological and archaeological researchers in the universities. An example of this is WAM staff, in the next month or so, under contract to an environmental consultancy, a survey of the land-snail fauna of Koolan Island as part of an Environmental Impact Study related to the expansion of the iron-ore mining on that island.

Museum conservators have established the principal mechanisms of deterioration of painted images of rock surfaces in the Kimberley on both sandstone (in the Mitchell Plateau) and limestone (in the Napier Range) sites. They have established micro climate modelling that enables prediction of the environment inside shelters and they have established the major role played by micro flora (bacteria, yeast, moulds and fungi) on the deterioration of the rock art.

The Museum Assistance Program (MAP) is continuing to work with local indigenous community groups in the Kimberley in terms of developing appropriate management procedures for their heritage. MAP has been giving advice to the proposed

Mowanjum Museum near Derby and the proposed Bugarrigarra Nyurdany Culture Centre in Broome with planning for sustainable operations. MAP has also had discussions with a number of key stakeholders interested in establishing a regional archive service.

Currently the Museum is undergoing a period of restructure with the Maritime Museum now incorporated with the WAM. Another issue being dealt with at present is the repatriation of human remains and secret sacred objects to indigenous groups. A business case is being prepared for the WA Government for a new museum to be build in Perth.

The current staff numbers at WAM are 120 staff, 30 vacancies, with 10 staff in curatorial positions. Funding is a major issue with 8 museums housing a collection of approximately 4 million items. At the present time WAM receives cash funding of \$12 million with \$3 million in revenue. The Melbourne Museum by comparison, although double the size, receives a budget of \$40 million.

In a new museum I would like to see at least some, or preferably all, of the following introduced.

- Access should be free
- Holding debates and discussions like tonight
- Richness of history through exhibitions e.g. new spider species found
- Indigenous culture, richness of around 40,000 years.
- History of people e.g. C Y O'Connor
- Shouldn't be deliberately controversial.

Dawn Casey