

Helping Hands – Strategies for Successful Museum Partnerships

Address by Dr Ian Galloway, Chairman of the ICOM Australian National Committee and Director, Queensland Museum . 29 April 2006 delivered to the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting : *A Centennial of Ideas* . 26 April - 1 May 2006 . Boston (USA)



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Today I would like to tell you about a new partnership program that is building bridges between Australian Museums and museums in the Asia Pacific region. This program has been an initiative of ICOM Australia which is one of the many national committees that make up the ICOM world wide network of museum professionals. In recent years a key focus of ICOM Australia has been responding to the needs of our museum colleagues in the Asia-Pacific region. The preservation of heritage collections and sites poses particular problems in the Asia-Pacific region - problems that are attributable to high levels of humidity and salt in the atmosphere, voracious tropical insects and mould.

Tsunamis and cyclones often lead to devastating damage and in more recent times civil unrest, armed conflicts and fragile economies have also had a significant impact on museums in the region.

In 2003 ICOM Australia hosted a session at the Museums Australia Conference with an address by Lawrence Foana'ota Director of the Solomon Islands National Museum and Chairman of the Pacific Island Museum Association. Lawrence spoke passionately about the challenges that face Pacific Island Museums and their most pressing needs.

At a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in Auckland later that year, Pacific Island leaders identified their key goals as economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security. However they also strongly endorsed the proposal that the maintenance and strengthening of cultural identity was a core issue for forum leaders.

There was great concern that growing migration, urbanisation and global popular culture were eroding cultural identity. Museums and other cultural organisations in the Pacific are keepers of national stories and custodians of the region's cultural heritage and as such play a key role in the maintenance and strengthening of cultural identity in the region.

At the 2004 Museums Australia Conference, the Chairman of ICOM Australia outlined a proposal for Australian Museums to partner with Pacific Island museums. ICOM Australia sought to identify a pool of skilled museum volunteers who were willing to work on identified projects addressing the urgent needs of Pacific Island museums. Agreement was reached between key Australian institutions that should operational funding be identified, a limited number of museum staff could be made available for this purpose. Identifying the needs of Pacific Island museums requires a clear understanding of the specific needs of particular museums. To achieve this level of understanding a number of Australian institutions agreed to partner with specified Pacific Island Museums. This was based on a variety of criteria such as the expertise of staff; the nature of collections held; past and current associations; geography; and travel considerations.

On this basis the following partnerships were established:

- * Queensland Museum and the Solomon Islands National Museum
- * Powerhouse Museum and the Fiji Museum
- * Australian Museum and the National Museum of Vanuatu
- * Museum Victoria and the Fiji Museum

The South Australian Museum has also recently indicated a desire to partner with the Papua New Guinea National Museum.

It is very pleasing that the proposal discussed at the 2004 Museums Australia Conference has now become a reality with the launch of the ICOM Australia Museum Partnership Program in August 2005. This is initially a 12 month pilot program with the National Museum of Australia providing seed funding of \$50,000 and the Australian Government's overseas aid agency – AusAID - funding projects up to a maximum of \$50,000.

While the ICOM Australia Museum Partnership Program is largely coordinated and delivered by a number of Australian museums, project participants can come from any Australian institution. The “home” institutions meet the salary costs of Australian staff involved in the project while the ICOM Australia Museums Partnerships Program meets operational costs such as materials, travel, accommodation and medical expenses.

The pilot year began with a scoping study of the collection management needs of the Solomon Islands National Museum. This was undertaken jointly by Queensland Museum and staff of the Solomon Islands National Museum. Collection management was identified by the Solomon Islands National Museum as its highest priority.

The Solomon Islands has experienced a decade of ethnic tensions and lawlessness. In particular from 1999 to 2003 the violence escalated and extortion and corruption became widespread. During this period Museum staff were frequently threatened and the collection store broken into on a number of occasions with the loss of significant collection items. This deteriorating situation culminated in April 2003 with the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands seeking assistance from the Australian Government.

A police, military, and civilian task force from Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific Island nations arrived in July 2003. Weapons were surrendered, law and order established, and government infrastructure was restored. Democratic elections were held in April this year free from the violence and intimidation experienced at previous elections.

Unfortunately all this turned pear shaped on 19 April when the Deputy Prime Minister in the previous Government was elected to the position of Prime Minister amid rumours of bribery and corruption.

Widespread rioting and looting occurred resulting in the almost total destruction of the Chinatown district of Honiara. Police and military reinforcements from Australia, New Zealand and Fiji have restored order but peace remains fragile.

Initially we were unable to contact the Museum or its Director but I have recently received word that the Museum, its staff, and collections are unharmed. When this current round of civil unrest erupted an Australian project team drawn from the Queensland Museum and the Australian War Memorial was about to leave for the Solomon Islands.

Their primary task was to deliver a collection management training program in conjunction with the accessioning, documentation, cataloguing and photographing of the collection and the establishment of a new collection data base. Staff were to be trained on the job working on their own collection.

The team remains committed to the project which will be completed as soon as the security situation improves.

In less troubled parts of the Pacific, the Australian Museum is currently working with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in the re-construction and conservation of four Lapita pots. These 3,000-year old pots once reconstructed will double the number of known complete Lapita pots ever found.

An important goal of this project is capacity building for staff in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre on conservation treatments especially with regard to pottery. Another aspect of the project is the provision of web based access to the Australian Museum's collection of pottery from Vanuatu for the benefit of the international community, and in particular the people of Vanuatu.

The Australian Museum has also joined forces with the Powerhouse Museum and the Fiji Museum to facilitate professional exchange between the Conservation Departments of each Museum. This has involved two Assistant Conservators from the Fiji Museum working closely with experienced conservators at the Australian Museum and the Powerhouse for a period of 6 weeks.

Museum Victoria and the Fiji Museum have developed a partnership to address collection storage issues at the Fiji Museum. The ethnographic and archaeological collection stores at the Fiji Museum are old and overcrowded placing a large part of the collection at risk. The people of Fiji are extremely proud of their museum and its collection which is of international significance.

The Fiji Museum has been approached by aid agencies from France and Japan who have expressed interest in financially supporting the construction of a new collection storage facility and associated laboratories.

The ICOM Australia Partnership project has brought to bear Museum Victoria's recent experiences in the development of new collection storage facilities in Melbourne on the challenges facing the Fiji Museum.

The project has involved the following:

- * an exchange of curatorial and collection management staff between Museum Victoria and the Fiji Museum to inspect collection storage facilities in Melbourne and Suva and to discuss best practice collection storage and environmental management
- * a detailed analysis of the collection held by the Fiji Museum and their storage requirements, and
- * the development of recommendations on the type, quantity and cost of storage infrastructure required to meet the diverse needs of the collection.

Thus far the ICOM Partnership Program has provided unique opportunities for the professional development of staff from both Australian and Pacific Island museums. A number of high priority issues for Pacific Island museums have been collaboratively resolved by the partner institutions, and the projects have enhanced the relationships that exist between the Pacific Island Museums and their Australian partners.

I am confident that at the end of our pilot year we will be able to show strong mutual benefit for all those involved with tangible outcomes that represent excellent value for the dollars invested. Hopefully this initial success will attract additional Commonwealth funding in 2006-2007 so the program can be broadened to include other Australian and Pacific Island Museum partners.

... and what are the key lessons we have learnt so far.

1. Mutual benefit must be a key outcome of the partnership - we need to recognize this and plan for it.
2. Partners need to work closely in determining priorities and scoping up projects – this is a collaborative venture.
3. Partners must communicate often and openly and try to understand one another's strengths and weaknesses.
4. Projects must be used to build the relationship between partners because this is the well from which everything springs.

Thank you for your attention – it has been a great privilege to speak at the 100th Anniversary of the American Association of Museums.

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Committee