

“Challenges and Achievements in the Asia/Pacific Region”

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(Presentation by Lisa Harvey, Strategic Collection Manager – “Queensland Museum Partnership Program with the Solomon Islands National Museum”)

1. Introduction:

Davina Bonner, Senior Conservator at the Queensland Museum conducted a scoping trip of the Solomon Islands National Museum in October 2005. The aim of which was to identify the collection management needs, and develop a project proposal to provide assistance to the Museum.

It became apparent that cataloguing and photographing of the collection was last undertaken in the late 1980's, so objects collected after this date had not been formally accessioned in a Register. As a result when objects were stolen during the periods of civil unrest, it was very difficult to know for sure what had disappeared.

It was determined that a stock take of the collection was required, with the establishment of both a manual and computerised database; including provision of training for the Museum's staff.

A trip was planned for April 2006 but had to be cancelled due to another episode of civil unrest and concerns for the safety of the Team.

Finally in September 2006 a Team of four staff (Davina Bonner, Senior Conservator; Jeff Hopkins-Weise, Assistant Collection Manager; and Lisa Harvey, Strategic Collection Manager at the Queensland Museum and Laura Kennedy, Preventive Conservation Officer from the Australian War Memorial) went to Honiara to commence a three week project.

2. Challenges

There were a range of challenges faced by the Team both intrinsic to the Museum itself and also to the context of the Solomon Islands in general.

2.1 Challenges specific to the National Museum:

2.1.2 Staffing and resources

- There was a serious shortage of staff at the Museum. The ethnographer had left shortly after the civil unrest and had not returned. The education officer had recently passed away and the photographer had left to take up other opportunities in the region. None of these positions had yet been re-filled, despite calls from the Museum Director.
- Lawrence Foana'ota, the Director, was meant to have retired from the Museum some time ago, but had agreed to stay on until a replacement could be found. To date they had not been able to find an appropriate replacement,

and his many other important commitments increasingly took him away from the Museum.

- Security was very poor; as indicated by the ease with which objects have been stolen in the past. The buildings were constructed of materials which made access relatively simple (such as louvered windows), and locks were basic. A Security Guard to monitor access was available some of the time, but resources for this position were not guaranteed.
- The Museum had limited access to resources in general, and appeared to be very poorly funded by the local Government. However, they had been able to secure aid from other countries in the past, such as the Youth Centre which was built with donations from the Japanese Government and various projects conducted on the Archaeology Collection by students and researchers at the University of Auckland.
- Even basic stationary was in short supply and access to computers was limited. There was little or no IT support available and power surges or total losses of power were intermittent. Three phase power was not available at the Museum.

2.1.2 Infrastructure and environment

- The collection storage areas and office spaces had minimal means of environmental control. The only functioning systems were overhead fans. Insulation in walls, ceilings and floors was poor or nonexistent, which made the prospect of limiting fluctuations in temperature and humidity very difficult.
- The general environment in Honiara contains a high degree of dust and pollution due to the poor maintenance of the surrounding roads and pavements, and the process of burning rubbish as the main means of disposal. This added to the poor environment, from the point of view of the prospective long term preservation of the collection.
- There was no access to electrical cleaning devices such as vacuum cleaners, and the only cleaning process was by straw broom. Although the Museum did employ a staff member to conduct the cleaning work and another to maintain the gardens, it was a difficult job to keep the problem under control.
- There were no obvious methods of pest control used at the Museum and a limited range of options were available. The Museum did not have access to a refrigerator let alone a freezer for pest treatments; however, a range of domestic pest control chemicals were available in the local stores.

2.2 Challenges associated with the Solomon Islands in general:

2.2.1 Infrastructure

- There were a limited number of shops available in Honiara with reference to the purchase of supplies, and at one stage during the third week supplies of bottled Australian water ran out in both of the small supermarkets. Most preserved food products are imported from Australia or Indonesia and are very expensive.
- The hotel had intermittent problems with water supply, and we were without running water for 4 days during the second week. The air conditioning systems, whilst very welcome in the heat, were very old and extremely noisy, which seriously hindered sleep at night.

2.2.2 Environment

- The political climate in the Solomon's was unpredictable and potentially unstable. During our trip, the Australian High Commissioner was expelled and Australia's relationship with the Solomon's deteriorated. Further civil unrest could not be ruled out in the future.
- The time of year selected for the trip was crucial, to try to avoid the hottest time of the year as well as peak wet season. Despite this, and despite the fact that most of the Team were from Queensland, the high temperatures and humidity in Honiara were very difficult to work in and severely impacted on the quantity of work which could be achieved each day.
- Little government money appeared to be spent on the maintenance of roads and pavements, which in themselves were a hazard, but in conjunction with this, limited maintenance work was also done on mosquito control such as keeping long grass down and addressing stagnant water pools, thus providing an ideal breeding ground for the insect.

2.2.3 Health issues

- Health became a problem for the Team. Despite all appropriate precautions, two of the Team contracted Malaria during the second week and all four suffered from intermittent bouts of gastro. Due to this, our original estimates about the quantity of work which could be achieved during the allocated timeframe were unfortunately, seriously eroded.

3. Outcomes

The project funding allowed for the provision of a lap top computer, complete with a version of the Queensland Museum collection database software; as well as 2,000 manual Record Sheets in plastic folders. The aim was to enter as many records as possible from the original Museum Registers into the database, and train staff in the software so that this work could be continued after the Team left. This would provide an easier means of searching the data and ensuring all available information could be in a single format. A copy of this would be burnt to disc and taken back to the Queensland Museum for safe keeping, so that if problems occurred with the software in the future, we would be able to supply a backup copy.

In addition a physical stock take would be conducted of the objects found in the store, with this information recorded on the manual Record Sheets. This included collecting physical information about the objects, collecting all the data on the object tags, taking object dimensions and a digital photograph. New tags were also attached to the objects to easily identify which items had been processed. The final aim of this work was to enter the information from the Record Sheets into the database. This would allow a comparison of what objects were physically there compared to what objects should be there according to the Registers; thus providing some indication of what objects had been stolen. (However, this would only be partly accurate as the Registers had not been used from the late 1980's onwards.)

The Team were able to physically stock take 662 objects (an average of 55 objects per day) and to enter 1,293 entries from the Registers into the database. In addition work was conducted in the storage area to improve collection housing. Shelves were cleaned and lined with cloth, collection material was re-stored by object type, shelves were addressed, and material was laid out to maximise the use of space whilst aiding

access as much as possible. Some objects consisting of more than one part had their parts registered and recorded.

It was originally estimated in the scoping trip that the collection was around 2,000 objects, but unfortunately the actual collection turned out to be considerably larger including a large amount of unregistered material. We had hoped to complete 95% of the work, but due to the health problems of the Team and the actual size of the collection we were unable to reach this target. However, the database is now up and running and training was provided to some of the Museum staff along with the provision of training manuals to ensure this work could continue.

4. Future directions:

4.1 Improved Museum resources

- Resourcing and staffing upgrades are required, starting with the appointment of essential staff such as an Ethnographer and a new Director, and provision of basic materials to run the Museum effectively. This would allow for the continuation of this project; making the collections easier to manage, and to the information about the collections more easily accessible.
- Upgrades to the present buildings would be beneficial to collection preservation, including better insulation, security and environmental controls.

4.2 New developments

- The Museum has considerable World War II material in its collection, most of which is unregistered. This topic is the basis of most of the tourism to the main island and brings in much needed funding and support. If the Museum could appoint a curator in this field to assess the collections and develop exhibitions around this theme, it would be possible to develop the museum's profile and potentially secure much needed additional support for future growth and development.
- The Museum exhibition space needs to be developed to attract more visitors and allow more of the collections to be displayed. In order to do this the Museum would benefit from an exhibition / display staff member, if only on a part time basis. The present spaces have been decimated by many artefacts being stolen, and they are now kept locked most of the time. Few visitors even know the exhibition space is there.

4.3 Future assistance

- This project has illuminated many areas at the National Museum where assistance is sorely needed and where future support could be beneficial. However, it has also identified the fact, that there are many difficulties and challenges faced by staff from Australia working for long periods in the Solomon's; and therefore a more effective method of assistance may be an exchange program, as other institutions have done. It would be more cost effective to bring someone from the Solomon's to Queensland, for a longer period of time, and provide training and support in that way.

5. Final comments

This paper would not be complete without stating what an exceptional experience the trip was for all those involved. The staff of the National Museum and the local community were overwhelmingly friendly, and made us feel very welcome and appreciated. It was very emotional on our last day when the staff organised a leaving party with lavish amounts of food and even Australian wine and parting gifts. While our work was only a drop in the ocean compared to the degree of assistance they need, it was truly rewarding to have been able to assist in some small way.