

Community Engaged Cultural Heritage Care: A Fellow's exploration of Community-led Preservation & Conservation Practices in New Zealand | Amelia O'Donnell, 2023



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Table of Contents

1	28
1. Acknowledgments	6. Considerations, Emerging Themes and Approach- based Recommendations
3	
2. Executive Summary	34
	7. Conclusion
4	
3. Fellowship Background	35
	8. References
9	
4. Fellowship Learnings	
25	
5. Personal, Professional and Sectoral Impact	

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1. Acknowledgments

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Personal Acknowledgements

The Fellow acknowledges the Yuggera and Turrbal people who are the Traditional Owners of Mianjin (Brisbane) the land on which she lives, works, and learns. She extends her respects to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledges their contribution to our collective past and future.

2

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2. Executive Summary

Community engagement with cultural heritage conservation is an influential concept re-shaping the conservation profession as written about by Clavir (2002), Scott (2015) and Bakhri, Sumichan & Putri (2022). Community- led heritage conservation activities strengthen connections between people and their heritage material, encourage active community inclusion in the preservation of cultural materials (tangible and intangible) and increases the wellbeing of those involved. This practice is mutually beneficial to our communities and our large cultural institutions who are often the custodians of cultural materials historically collected from within the community past and present.

3

While working in large cultural heritage institutions conservators may have the opportunity to integrate community- engaged conservation activities into their professional practice through special projects or ad-hoc opportunities. While doing so they must simultaneously balance the delivery of organisational objectives and respond to the needs of the communities in which they work.

In September 2022 Amelia O'Donnell, a conservator with a strong interest in community engaged heritage care, travelled to New Zealand for one month to expand her knowledge of community- led conservation and observe leading models of this practice. The Fellow chose to focus on collaborative projects involving museum/institutional staff and Māori and Pacific Islander communities in New Zealand. Such projects were selected because the Fellow viewed them as successful examples. The Fellow believes where appropriate, some learnings from these settings are transferable to other contexts in Australia where institutional conservators work directly with source communities First Nations and others.

The Fellow's main objective was to examine the conservator's practical role in supporting community- led conservation activities/projects. Within this objective the Fellow also sought to understand how the approach might influence conservation treatment decision making, workflows/ working context, collection housing & storage, and the development of culturally appropriate preservation or conservation advice/resources.

The Fellow limited the scope of her research to examples of institutional/community collaborative projects due to the similarity shared with her own professional experiences. The Fellow has an implicit understanding of this working context and hopes that she can use this element of familiarity to effectively disseminate Fellowship learnings and develop her own professional practice.

The Fellow acknowledges there are a multitude of strong examples of community- led conservation projects in Australia and New Zealand (see appendix 1). She values the long-established expertise held by community members, conservators and others who work outside the institutional setting.

3. Fellowship Background

Fellowship Context

Conservators are entrusted with the care and preservation of incredibly significant and valuable collections held in public cultural institutions. In Australia, formally recognised training to become a conservator is offered at just two tertiary education institutions. There is no linear pathway to becoming a conservator. Conservators may also develop their practice through private apprenticeship- style traineeships, work- integrated learning or overseas training.

Importantly there is no targeted, consistent, and structured training pathway for a conservator to become specialised in community- led conservation practice. After graduation the emerging conservator must find ad-hoc opportunities to build their experience and deepen their knowledge in this area.

Community- led conservation is arguably now a part of many a conservator's role when working in large public cultural institutions. Every activity undertaken by the conservator such as conservation treatment, preventive conservation, offering professional recommendations/advice or researching collections is ideally underpinned by ethically sound decision making which may also include culturally safe practices specific to the source community from which the collection originates.

What practical skills are required of the conservator? How should they apply ethical conservation decision making in this context?

Working within this scope the Fellow sought to identify how conservators could integrate community- led practices into their everyday work. She found it to be achievable through small actions or changes in practice.

Fellowship Methodology: Pre- travel virtual component

The Fellow was awarded the Fellowship in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic which delayed the applied research travel component until September 2022.

The Fellow applied a thematic approach to the Fellowship undertakings combining virtual engagement with stakeholders, virtual and in- person conference attendance, informal interviews, immersive experiences, observation, site visits and participatory learning. From these combined experiences key ideas and themes emerged: these will be explored in the latter part of this report.

Over the two-year period leading up to Fellowship travel the methodology remained flexible and evolved to accommodate changing travel restrictions throughout the pandemic.

Before travel the Fellow attended three virtual specialist conferences to develop industry networks, gauge attendance and representation of conservators at these events and to understand what dominant topics and themes emerged during presentations and breakout room conversations.

The virtual conferences included-

- MuseumNext Disrupt 5-30 October 2020.
- The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) SPNHC (The Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections) Transform: Joint Virtual Annual Meeting, May 10- June 24, 2021.
- The Inclusive Museums Research Network Fourteenth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum: What Museums Post Pandemic? 8-10 September 2021.

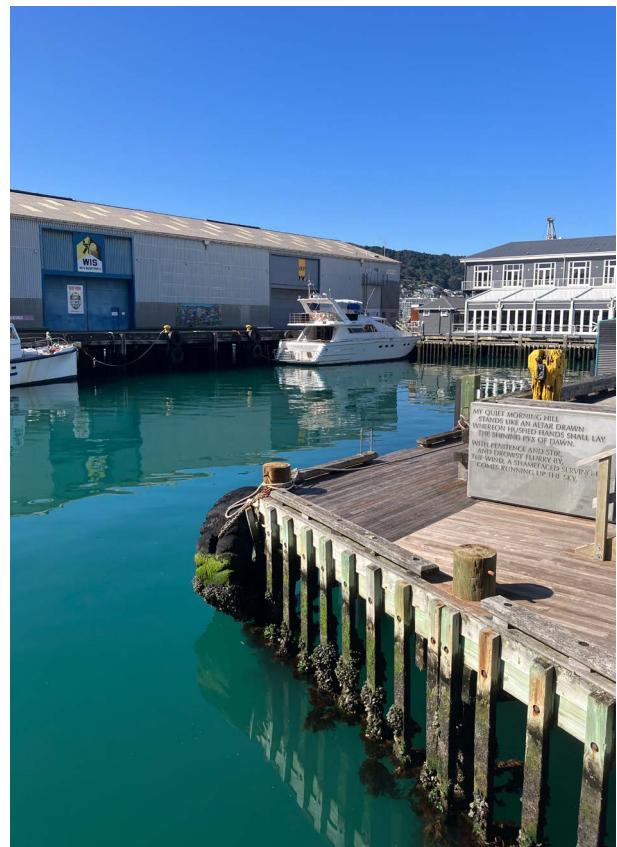
In preparation for travel the Fellow engaged with stakeholders to expand and strengthen her networks. During this time the Fellow was privileged to virtually connect with conservators working in the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, National Library of New Zealand (NZ), Alexander Turnbull Library, National Preservation Office NZ, the Museum of Te Papa Tongarewa, Archives NZ Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki NZ, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira NZ & Tūhura Otago Museum NZ.

Fellowship Methodology: Research travel

The Fellow travelled to New Zealand from 3-28 September 2022. During this period the Fellow attended a specialist conference in-person, undertook site visits & tours of multiple large public cultural heritage institutions and a community museum, held informal interviews with conservators and other museum professionals, observed and participated in a community-led preservation workshop.

The full itinerary of activities and locations visited during Fellowship research travel included...

Figure 1. The Fellow attended the IIC 29th Biennial Congress held in Wellington. Pictured: the waterfront in Wellington. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)



- In- person attendance at the International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) 29th Biennial Congress, Conservation & Change: Response, Adaption and Leadership, 5-9 September at the National Library of New Zealand, Wellington.
- Visit to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.
- Participation in the Taonga Preservation Wānanga (workshop) with team of conservators (institutional & private practice), community engagement staff and Marae community members at the Puketawa Marae, Hokianga.
- Visit to the Rangikohu Marae, Herekino.
- Visit to the Raiātea Museum & Motutī Marae, Hokianga.
- Visit to the Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki, Auckland.
- Visit to the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.
- Visit to Tūhura Otago Museum, Dunedin.

While on location the Fellow toured collection storage areas, exhibition spaces & conservation labs, had conversations with a multitude of community leaders & members, museum professionals and conservators.

Fellowship Biography

Amelia O'Donnell is a Paper Conservator & Professional Member of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) with an interest in community- led conservation practice.

Her qualifications include a Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation (Paper) from The University of Melbourne, a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts/ Printmaking) and a Diploma of Visual Arts from RMIT University, Melbourne. While undertaking the Fellowship Amelia was also employed as a paper conservator at the State Library of Queensland. Prior to becoming a Conservator, she worked in the social enterprise & community sector.

These intersecting working backgrounds equipped the Fellow with skills to sporadically participate in community-led conservation projects through tertiary education, volunteer experience and while employed at large public cultural institutions.

Amelia's interest in community engagement with cultural materials conservation was first sparked by experiences during her thesis project at the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) in Western Australia, led by Dr Ormond- Parker in 2017 (Born in Darwin and of Alyawarra decent, at the time of writing this report Dr Ormond- Parker is an Australian Research Centre Fellow

and Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, Australian National University). Amelia worked in a team of key KALACC staff and fellow student conservators to reorganise & rehouse the KALACC archives and collections prioritising direct community access, the digitisation of audiovisual collections and long-term preservation.

Since then, Amelia has worked as a conservator in some of Australia's "memory institutions" such as state archives and libraries where community access to and engagement with collections is at the core of organisational operations.

Upon her return to Australia Amelia continued to work as a Paper Conservator at the State Library of Queensland and then the Queensland State Archives. She endeavors to integrate learnings from her fellowship into her everyday practices as well as sharing her knowledge with her local colleagues to encourage and support conservation practices centred on the wellbeing of people and communities as well as the collections.



Figure 2. The Fellow has worked as a conservator at various large cultural heritage institutions on the east coast of Australia and currently works as a Senior Paper Conservator at the Queensland State Archives.

Acronyms & Definitions

AICCM the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials

Collection Care “Collection care refers to the methods of storage and display of collections items as well as basic approaches to condition reporting, environmental monitoring and control of pests.” (AICCM 2022)

Community- engaged conservation (Fellow’s own terminology) influenced by a ‘People- Centred Approach’ as outlined by the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (Court & Wijesuriya 2015) or ‘Community- engaged practice’ as outlined in The Relationship is the Project: working with communities (Lillie, Larsen, Kirkwood & Brown 2020).

Hapū (noun) kinship group, clan, tribe, subtribe - section of a large kinship group and the primary political unit in traditional Māori society (Te Aka Māori Dictionary n.d).

IIC International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

Kai food, meal. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary n.d).

Kākahu “In te ao Māori the word kākahu can describe the type of clothing one might wear, and a word that is used when talking of Māori cloaks as a general term. This word, in parts, forms the classification of (our) different styles and types of kākahu.” (Mark Sykes, Te Papa Museum 30 April 2018).

KALACC Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, Western Australia.

NZCCM New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Materials Pū Manaaki Kahurangi

PCAP Pacific Collections Access Project

Source Community The communities from which museum collections originate (Peers & Brown 2003)

Taonga treasure, anything prized- applied to anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomenon, ideas, and techniques (Te Aka Māori Dictionary n.d).

Wānanga (verb) to meet and discuss, deliberate, consider. (noun) seminar, conference, forum, educational seminar. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary n.d)

4. Fellowship Learnings

The Fellowship spanned two years from 2020-2022 and involved virtual and in-person learning components. Over this period the Fellow read relevant industry literature, attended virtual conferences, and engaged in numerous informal conversations about community-led conservation activities. Pandemic related delays in the lead up to travel was unexpectedly beneficial as it allowed the Fellow to reflect on her chosen topic and gain deeper understanding of it.

The travel itinerary and proposed activities of the Fellowship were influenced by the availability of conservators working within the institutions as well as the dynamics of negotiating site visits to institutions and vulnerable communities while New Zealand was at an 'orange' COVID-19 Protection level in September 2022. Consequently, the itinerary proposed for travel in 2020 differed significantly to the 2022 itinerary.

The key research travel components of the Fellowship were in-person attendance at a specialist conference, participation in a community-led preservation workshop and site visits and tours of multiple large cultural institutions.

The Fellow applied a thematic approach to the research travel experiences. The broad topic of community-led conservation was used as a theme to initiate conversations and guide the Fellow's observation or participation in conservation activities. Key ideas, recurring practices and valuable learnings emerged from this informal approach.

- Community-led development of culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections.
- Conservation decision making- conservators relinquishing control to prioritise community involvement in assessing significance and defining preservation goals.
- Putting people at the centre of conservation activities- how can conservators working within institutions make small adaptive changes to their practice to support community-led conservation?

Attendance at a Specialist Conference

The Fellow attended the IIC (International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works) 29th biennial Congress in Wellington NZ from 5-9 September 2022. The theme of the congress was Conservation & Change: response, adaption, and leadership.

A range of topics were covered in the programming including-

- Challenging conservation approaches in response to historical, social and environmental challenges.
- The changing role of conservation in communities.

- The development or implementation of shared, collaborative or co-designed conservation treatments, approaches or methodologies.
- Mitigating or adapting to the effects of climate change.
- Role of conservation in sustainable development.
- The role of conservation in repatriation of cultural materials and challenging colonial practice.
- Scientific research that promotes or informs changes in conservation practice.
- Traditional vs. new approaches to leading and managing conservation. (IIC 2022)

Attendance at the Congress provided the Fellow with an opportunity to hear about community-led conservation concepts demonstrated in real world examples as presented by the many excellent speakers.

A highlight for the Fellow was the Forbes prize lecture “Having faith in ourselves” delivered by Vicki-Anne Heikell MNZM, leading Maori Paper Conservator and Field Conservator for the National Preservation Office, Alexander Turnbull Library. The lecture was co-delivered by Dr Te Kanawa, Textile Conservator and weaver with expertise in Maori weaving and traditional dyeing techniques and Puawai Cairns, Director of Audience and Insights at Te Papa Museum.

During the presentation Heikell spoke about conservation as “...the restitution of wellbeing of people and objects.”

She explored the idea of institutions and conservators putting people rather than objects at the centre. Heikell believes the wellbeing of people and objects are inextricably linked and stated, “Loss is more than just an object’s materiality; its bigger loss is that of connection to community.”

She also examined the role of the conservator and urged conservators to meaningfully enact reciprocity when working with communities on mutually beneficial community-led conservation projects. Heikell posited that real reciprocity is about “Giving up power and authority of decision making about use, access to and location of collections” and “...devolving decisions about conservation to communities...”. (Heikell 2022)

Heikell’s words triggered a moment of clarity for the Fellow and set the tone for how she might approach the month-long research travel experience. The Fellow sought to identify the practical skills conservators require to facilitate community-led conservation activities, to understand how professional values support these activities and how to tread the line between becoming an “expert” in the field while also relinquishing control where appropriate.

In- person Tour as Part of the Congress

As part of the Congress the Fellow toured the Taonga Māori collection store at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The tour was led by Moana Parata, Kaitiaki Taonga Collection Manager. The collection stores hold thousands of treasured Māori cultural materials including kakahu (cloaks), whakairo (carvings in wood, stone, bone), kete (baskets) and mere (weapons).

Museum collection storage repositories are climate controlled and designed to preserve the collections and maximise object storage capacity. Due to their primary functions these spaces often feel impersonal, sterile, and unwelcoming.

During the tour Parata explained how Māori culture values are expressed in museum collection storage repositories to “keep the taonga warm” keeping connections strong between the community and the collections. Mina McKenzie (1930- 1997), an influential Māori curator, lecturer and cultural advisor explained the concept of “keeping taonga warm” as “...an unbroken thread between the people and their past, present and future.” (McKenzie, 1993, p.79).

Parata gave the example of how the kakahu are accessed when visitors come into the repository. Visiting them is one of the ways taonga are kept warm. Kakahu that are frequently viewed or accessed by visiting source communities are kept in easy to access locations. They are housed in large plan drawers with the kakahu laid out flat within the drawer for full viewing presentation. Drawers open at a suitable viewing height and allow space for groups to gather around are selected for frequently viewed taonga. The kakahu are also housed to ensure they are easily viewable without the need for frequent handling. For example, the object may not have a protective covering, or the covering is designed so that it can be removed in a safe manner and with ease. In this example the requirements of the community were balanced with traditional museum conservation practices. The source community require easy access and viewing of the kakahu while the museum requires the object be stored for long- term preservation.

A Conservator is typically responsible for making recommendations about how a collection object should be stored for its long-term preservation. This can include selecting suitable archival materials, the design of the storage box/housing and choosing the ideal storage location for the object. In this example the cultural requirements of the source community were balanced alongside the need to preserve the taonga.

The Fellow considered the role of the conservator when applying their expertise to support specific cultural requirements of source communities when accessing collections in an institutional setting. She considers this example as a learning and demonstration of community- led development of culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections.

Taonga Preservation Wānanga (workshop) at Puketawa Marae, Utakura Valley, Hokianga, 15-17 September 2022

The Fellow attended a three-day Taonga Preservation Wānanga as a participatory and immersive learning experience. The workshop was facilitated by the Puketawa Marae community, a team of Māori Conservators with material specialisations in paper, photographs, textiles/traditional dye techniques, objects and community development professionals. The team represented the marae, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Preservation Office and conservators in private practice. The team included-

Katene Erickson Secretary of the Puketawa Marae.

Vicki-Anne Heikell Paper Conservator and Field Conservator for the National Preservation Office, Alexander Turnbull Library.

Norm Heke independent photographer.

Rangi Te Kanawa Textiles Conservator and expert weaver specialising in Māori textiles and traditional dyeing techniques.

Rose Evans Object Conservator and Director of Objectlab Ltd, independent heritage consultancy based in Auckland, NZ.

Reremoana Ormsby Development Advisor Te Awe Kōtuku, National Services, Te Paerangi Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Paora Tibble Iwi Development Manager, Pouwhirinaki ā-Iwi, National Services, Te Paerangi Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Hikitia Harawira Iwi Development Adviser, National Services, Te Paerangi Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Kaye-Marie Dunn Ahau Co-Founder, Whānau Data Platform which helps to digitally preserve Māori family and cultural information.

Over three days each facilitator offered advice on taonga preservation, distributed collection care resources authored in te reo Māori, examined the physical condition of the taonga, advised on how to select archival materials and conservation grade storage solutions for the taonga, how to digitise a collection, how to construct a support for a textile object and how to roll different types of kakahu including a Pākē (rain cape) and a Kahu kiwi (kiwi feather cloak) and large textile flag onto physical supports for storage. The Fellow participated in the workshop by offering preservation advice and assisting with the construction of customised object supports and boxes.



Figure 3. Norm Heke digitising a framed portrait photograph belonging to the Puketawa Marae collection. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022).

On the third day of the workshop some of the team and the Fellow visited the Motutū settlement in North Hokianga and the Raiātea Museum. The Raiātea Museum is a hapū owned and operated museum that houses rare collections of Māori and European Catholic artefacts, a photograph collection and a series of manuscripts authored by local ancestors.

The collection is culturally and historically significant because it shows the history of Catholicism in New Zealand as well as the dynamic intersection of Māori culture and the Catholic faith.

Volunteer staff gave the group a detailed tour of the exhibition spaces, explained the significance of the collections and toured the collection storage areas. The staff spoke with the Fellow about the 'Collection Rehousing Project' which was part of the Raiātea Whare Taonga Resource and

Participants from the marae brought their individual taonga to the workshop to be assessed. A conservator and the custodian of the taonga assessed its conservation needs and identified preservation goals for the workshop. Preservation goals included learning methods for high-quality digitisation of the taonga, making a custom-made archival storage box and support for the object or selecting priority taonga for future conservation work. The Fellow observed the professional conduct of the conservators while working outside of the institutional setting. The conservators were mindful to ensure community-led discussions and decision making were kept at the centre of all workshop activities.



Figure 4. Conservator Vicki-Anne Heikell assesses a textile flag with workshop participants. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)



Figure 5. A volunteer staff member at the Raiātea Museum holding custom made archival storages box for collections. The volunteer staff member designed and fabricated the boxes as part of the 'Collection Rehousing Project'. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)

Archive Centre project in 2019 (see appendix 2.). They worked in collaboration with a conservator to design the exhibition spaces, and construct customised conservation housing for the collections and develop culturally appropriate descriptive labelling for collection storage.

Key Learnings:

Throughout the workshop the Fellow was privileged to participated in all workshop activities, hold informal conversations with community members and facilitators or observe proceedings when participation or conversation was not appropriate (during some ceremonial activities and community- led discussions).

This approach yielded invaluable practical learnings about how the conservators worked within the community in a mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and respectful way. Amongst several learnings the most valuable were around...

Putting people at the centre of conservation activities- Workshop structure

This aspect was most clearly expressed in the structure of the workshop. The facilitators were aware that participants, some of whom were very senior leaders in community, took time away from their regular commitments to attend the workshop. The facilitators designed the workshop program to allow generous time for community-led discussion. The Fellow observed how the conservators acknowledged and showed respect for the valuable historical, cultural, and materials-based knowledge held within the marae community. At times, the conservator simply stepped aside to listen to discussions about preserving the taonga rather than dominating the discussion by asserting their expertise.



Figure 6. The Fellow observing while a community member of the Puketawa Marae led discussions about identifying taonga preservation goals for the workshop. Image shows taonga brought to the workshop laid out on the tables. (Photographed by Vicki-Anne Heikell 2022)

As a conservator the Fellow knows that, due to the nature of their work, conservators may have the tendency to focus on complex and detailed aspects of the task, sometimes forgetting to step back and observe the broader context. This can be time consuming and unproductive. Reflecting on this the Fellow concluded that attempting to apply the dynamics of institutional conservation practice where conservators may focus primarily on small and complex details is not useful in a community workshop setting.

The Fellow observed how adept the facilitating conservators were in their interpersonal interactions and physical work. They made small changes to their practice respectfully observing discussions rather than leading, framing their expert recommendations in a way that prioritised the needs of the community, remained flexible to ensure the content they delivered was useful and remained focused on broad preservation goals rather than getting bogged- down in details that were not immediately relevant.

Community- led development of culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections- Housing a 200+ year old kakahu

Making customised boxes and supports for the taonga accounted for a large portion of the limited workshop time. Purchasing the required archival materials, oversized archival board, tools and transporting the supplies to a remote location has logistical and budgetary challenges. The Fellow questioned why boxes were being made from scratch when prefabricated boxes could be fitted out and used instead.

The Fellow participated in the customised box making. As it progressed, she began to understand why boxes were being made from scratch.

For example, a box made for a highly significant prized kakahu over 200 years old (not pictured for cultural reasons). Rangi Te Kanawa (Textile Conservator) and a senior community leader begun the housing process by co- assessing the taonga and co- designing the box with customised internal object supports. From start to finish several workshop participants, the senior leader, the conservator, and the Fellow were all involved in fabricating the housing. Everyone was very invested in ensuring the kakahu was properly housed. When the moment came to place the 200+ year old kakahu in the custom-made box the room was filled with reverence and awe from all.



Figure 7. An example of taonga belonging to the Puketawa Marae community. This kakahu was assessed and rehoused during the workshop. (Photographed by Norm Heke 2022)



Figure 8. Conservator Rangi Te Kanawa assesses a kakahu with workshop participants. (Photographed by Norm Heke 2022)

The process of designing and making the box encouraged participant inclusion and meaningful investment in the outcomes of the process. The Fellow believes the impact of community-led conservation gained by participating in this simple activity was a valuable learning that can only be deeply understood through experience.

Figure 9. The Fellow and a workshop participant making a customised archival storage box for a kakahu. (Photographed by Vicki- Anne Heikell 2022)





Figure 10. The Fellow and a workshop participant place the kakahu in its customised box they made together. (Photographed by Vicki- Anne Heikell 2022)

Visit to Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, Thursday 22 September 2022.

20



Figure 11. Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)

The Fellow visited Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum to informally interview staff about their experiences and reflections of the Pacific Collections Access Project (PCAP) (2016-2019). While on site the Fellow also had the privilege of touring collection storage areas, the Conservation lab and the Hotonui Māori meeting house.

The purpose of the visit was to gain a deeper understanding of the practical elements of working with communities and museum collections in an institutional setting, how cultural requirements influence the storage of collections and the role of the conservator in supporting community engagement with collections held in large institutions.

The PCAP was a “Collections Readiness” project as part of the Future Museum 20 year (2012-2032) strategic plan for the museum (see appendix 3). The project spanned over three years from 2016-2019. In this time over 5,000 objects from the museum collection were described, catalogued, conserved, and housed in a safe and accessible way by the project team and members of the Auckland- based Pacific community. The project team included conservators, collections technicians, storage technicians, a programme manager, a community engagement facilitator, and a community engagement navigator.

The project’s objectives were to increase understanding and knowledge of the museum’s Pacific collections, improve the housing and storage of collections and support increased public access to and engagement with the collections through digitisation. Source communities collaborated with museum staff to develop detailed and culturally appropriate terminology for object names, materials, and fabrication techniques. This information was updated in the collections database, institutional website and placed on object box labels.

Jami Williams, Programme Manager on PCAP (currently Curatorial Support Manager, Human History Department at the museum), Leone Samu Tui, a PCAP Collection Technician (currently Associate Curator Documentary Heritage Pacific Collections at the museum) and Sue Cooper (Principal Conservator) generously hosted the Fellow on a tour of collection repositories and shared their reflections about working on the project.

Amongst many valuable insights the Fellow noted two key areas of practical knowledge that could be used as learnings for a conservator who might work in a similar project setting in Australia.

Putting people at the centre of conservation activities - Working in the Collections Hub & Community days.

A ‘Collections Hub’ was established as part of the PCAP. This is where the main work of the project took place. This included object examination & assessment, digitisation and box making. The space was designed to be flexible and allowed for physical workspaces and smaller private spaces for sensitive discussions. Williams and Samu Tui spoke of how the design of the space encouraged cross-pollination of ideas, observations, and consultation.

The Fellow reflected on how she might undertake conservation activities while working in a shared and flexible space with institution staff and the public. The design of the space influenced how the work was carried out during the PCAP. Williams and Samu Tui discussed the open layout and how its design encouraged staff and community members to feel welcome, to share their knowledge and consult each other whenever needed.

‘Community days’ were held in the space where large selections of objects (from a single source

community) were taken out of storage and laid out on tables. This method prompted community members and project staff to examine, identify, correctly name the objects, and share information about how the objects were made.

22

Williams and Samu Tui reflected on the logistical challenges of simultaneously working with a large quantity of objects. For example, tracking multiple objects and their movements through each stage of the project significantly increased the administrative workload for museum staff. However, the valuable conversations, contextual information and tacit knowledge about the objects that surfaced when objects were seen together far outweighed the logistical challenge of simultaneously retrieving them from storage.

This working context differs from traditional professional practice where the conservator might be the only person permitted to handle the object. The Fellow considered how she might navigate the need for direct access and handling of objects by the source community while balancing this requirement with the physical safety of the objects. How might she challenge traditional museum practice and facilitate community- led conservation activities? In her practice as a conservator how might she make small changes to support this?

Williams and Samu Tui spoke of how deeply the community cares for the collections: they have strong connections to each object and have tacit knowledge of its materiality. For these reasons conventional object handling protocols were made more flexible to facilitate the community's direct access to the objects.

The Fellow learned that a conservator's role may be to accept a reasonable but minimal level of risk, trust in and respect the source communities who are the experts on these objects. In this instance it may not be appropriate for the conservator to be the primary object handler or to 'hover' while community members handle the collections.

Community- led development of culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections- Object housing and design and labels.

While walking through the collection storage areas Williams and Samu Tui explained how traditional museum practice combines with source community knowledge and recommendations to influence the design of object housing, labelling and storage of the objects.

Housing design: housing was designed to allow objects to be easily viewed without the need for frequent handling or removal of protective archival wrappings/covers. For example, some objects were housed in boxes with transparent viewing windows, some objects were housed in boxes without wrapping so they could be viewed without handling, rolled textiles were wrapped with Mylar™ (an inert clear polyester film) rather than Tyvek™ or similar (an inert, spun bound

polythylene opaque white wrapping) so they could be viewed without being handled and unrolled).

Object labelling: object boxes were labelled with the name of the object in the local language as the primary descriptor rather than using generic English terminology. For example, a “food basket and bag” from Rotuma Fiji was relabelled with its name in language- I lalakai and Rubu. This intersection of traditional museum practice (Eurocentric terminology used on object labelling for storage) and object labelling relevant to the cultural and language protocols of the source community demonstrates a small change of practice that has a big impact through meaningfully acknowledging the cultural knowledge of the source community by using correct and culturally appropriate object descriptors.

Categorisation of storage areas: for cultural reasons, objects were grouped together in storage by country of origin rather than material type. Storing museum collections by material type is a convention typical of traditional museum practice. The choice to store objects/collections by material type is somewhat informed by the specific preservation needs of the material (i.e environmental controls, shelf space, object size, housing type). While walking through the collection repositories Williams and Samu Tui talked about the deliberate choice to group objects together by country of origin and balancing this choice with the preservation needs of each object type.

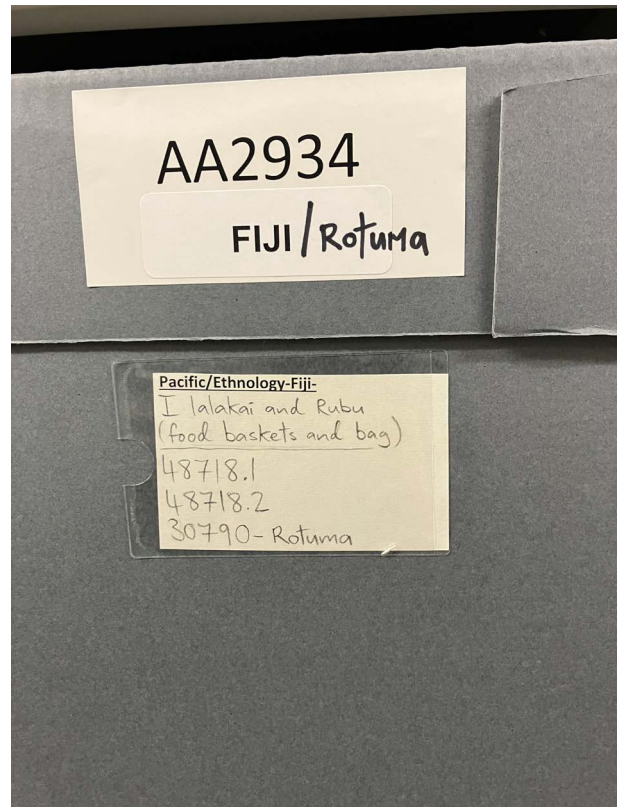


Figure 12. An example of collection storage boxes with object labelling in language. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)



Figure 13. An example of objects stored together by country of origin rather than object material type. (Photographed by Amelia O'Donnell 2022)

5. Personal, Professional and Sectoral Impact

Personal Impact

The support of the Fellowship provided the Fellow with the rare opportunity to spend a month attending a specialist conference, tour cultural heritage institutions, participate in a community preservation workshop and speak with community members, conservators and colleagues working in the cultural heritage sector.

Participating in the Taonga Preservation Wānanga had an especially significant personal impact on the Fellow. At every stage of the workshop the Fellow was warmly welcomed and invited to participate by community members and fellow conservators. The invaluable generosity and support positively influenced the Fellow and extended far beyond simply practical learning outcomes of the fellowship. Although she gained important knowledge through conventional research methods, her understanding of community- led conservation practices was deepened by these real- world immersive learning experiences.

The Fellow observed the conduct of the conservators while they were working with the marae community. When she next works in a setting where she engages directly with the public or works directly with a source community, she will consciously action professional practices that demonstrate kindness, respect and reciprocity. As she observed in during the workshop.

These practices might include sometimes stepping back as the ‘expert’ to make space for community- led discussions and decision making around the care of collections or simply mindfully selecting the most appropriate and helpful way to offer her expert advice. Small changes to professional practice are heavily influenced by the specific context in which they are undertaken and whom the conservator is working with. Through actioning these values in her own everyday work, the Fellow hopes to represent her profession as one that puts the wellbeing of people at the centre of conservation activities.

Professional Impact

Since returning from her Fellowship the Fellow has gained a full- time employment as a Senior Conservator at the Queensland State Archives (QSA). In 2021, before the Fellow commenced her employment at QSA in 2023, the organisation appointed Rose Barrowcliffe, Butchulla researcher to the position of First Nations Archives Advisor (CHDE 2021). Barrowcliffe encourages QSA to reflect on how Australia’s First Nations people are represented in the archives as part of Queensland’s path to treaty.

The two events are unrelated but fortuitous for the Fellow as her time at QSA will focus on a project to preserve, conserve, and make accessible (through digital or physical access) Queensland government records relating to First Nations content. This has given the Fellow the opportunity to apply her fellowship learnings and build on her knowledge of community- led conservation.

26

Using her Fellowship learnings and position as a Senior Conservator the Fellow has initiated workplace conversations about storing digital conservation documentation in a culturally appropriate manner within the archives organisational internal record keeping system. For example, applying a sensitive content flag or warning to limit broad internal staff access to culturally sensitive conservation documentation. This recommendation would rely on input from the relevant community to advise on restrictions and access levels. In some ways this is like the culturally appropriate labelling protocols applied to collection housing at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. It is a small and achievable measure that demonstrates how conservators working in an institutional setting can put the community at the centre of their professional practice.

Sectoral Impact

As mentioned earlier community engagement with conservation is an already strong and established concept influencing the practice of conservators in Australia, New Zealand and further abroad. The theme of the IIC 29th Biennial Congress attended by the Fellow in September, Conservation & Change: Response, Adaption and Leadership reflects the already established need for conservators and cultural heritage institutions to better serve the communities in which they exist in and work with.

The Fellowship helped the Fellow to strengthen and expand her professional networks. In the immediate future the Fellow can have an impact on the overall sector by using use her expertise to contribute to the existing field of knowledge and practice and share her learnings through professional socialisation and professional development activities like conferences and workshops.

The Fellow can also have an impact on the cultural heritage conservation sector by implementing a people- centred approach to her own conservation practice while working as a conservator at large public cultural heritage institutions in Australia. She can adopt and adapt approaches to community engagement with cultural heritage conservation and people- centred practices demonstrated in New Zealand to an Australian context.

This might include making recommendations about collection housing design to better facilitate direct access by the source community, seeking source community advice on culturally appropriate storage of collections, providing specialist conservation knowledge to support institutional projects/

activities where community are engaged to work directly with institutional collections or advocating for community- led discussions and decision making about the preservation of collections.

In future the Fellow aims to establish a Special Interest Group (SIG) for conservators who specialise in community- engaged conservation practice within the AICCM and NZCCM. Her experiences during the Fellowship research and travel suggest that there is already a large cohort within the conservation profession who have interest in or are already engaged experts in this field. The establishment of a SIG would formally bring together conservators in Australia and New Zealand to exchange ideas, disseminate knowledge or practical information, have robust discussions or facilitate symposia/events.

27

6. Considerations, Emerging Themes and Approach- based Recommendations

Throughout the Fellowship the Fellow identified recurring themes which support approach- based recommendations within the practices of conservators working in institutions. The themes included:

28

- **Conservators working alongside communities to develop culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections.** As observed in collection repositories at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, Tūhura Otago Museum and the Raiātea community Museum.
- **Conservation decision making and community involvement in assessing significance and defining preservation goals.** An approach that encourages conservators to (sometimes) step back and relinquish control while working with source communities who have specific knowledge about collection objects. This concept was strongly communicated during the informal staff interviews about the PCAP and tour of collection repositories at Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira and demonstrated by the conservators who facilitated the Taonga Preservation Wānanga at the Puketawa marae.
- **Putting people at the centre of conservation activities.** Throughout the Fellowship the Fellow observed multiple subtle practical expressions of this approach. The idea was most clearly demonstrated in the design of the “community hub” workspace during the PCAP and at the Taonga Preservation Wānanga. At the time of the Fellow’s visit conservators at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira were also developing collection care resources written in te reo Māori. At the Taonga Preservation Wānanga the facilitators distributed culturally relevant collection preservation literature to workshop participants.

Following the emerging common themes, the Fellow was able to identify three key practical or approach- based recommendations for fellow conservators interested in community- engaged conservation practice. The recommendations offer practical ways to put people at the centre of conservation activities. They are intended to be small but meaningful and easily achievable for a conservator working in a large public cultural heritage institution.

The Fellow was privileged to engage with conservators and museum professionals in New Zealand who demonstrated deep respect and genuine care for the communities they worked alongside. Their personal values were reflected in their work, for this reason the Fellow’s recommendations are moderate rather than drastic.

Approach- based Recommendation 1: Conservators working alongside communities to develop culturally appropriate housing and storage of collections.

The development of culturally appropriate collection housing and storage within an institutional or community museum setting needs to balance community access to collections with long-term preservation. Conservators working in institutions are most likely to have influence or make recommendations about how collections are housed and stored in the repository. In some instances, they may have the opportunity to co- design collection housing and storage directly with source communities.

The conventions of traditional museum practice might typically recommend housing an object in a closed archival box for long term preservation. However, this design may not consider the needs of the source community who may wish to visit the object in the institutional setting. How often might the object be visited? Will the community need to physically access and handle the object while visiting? Does the object require visibility or light to remain activated and alive?

The Fellow observed culturally appropriate object housing and storage in collection repositories at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, Tūhura Otago Museum and the Raiātea community Museum. For example, housing an object in an archival box with a transparent mylar window and accessible top opening to allow for easy viewing by visiting members of the community.

In this area the Fellow believes there is an opportunity for the conservator to make small adjustments to their own practice to physically integrate the cultural requirements of the source community into the design of the object housing or storage area. Small changes to object housing design that balance the requirements of cultural protocols with preservation can have a big impact.

In the institutional setting the conservator holds a position of influence in making decisions about object storage. The Fellow recommends that, where possible, conservators make every effort to engage directly with the source community to co- design culturally appropriate collection housing and storage.

The conservator can action community- engaged practice by making culturally informed preservation recommendations to the institution.

Approach-based Recommendation 2: Conservation decision making and community involvement in assessing significance and defining preservation goals.

30

The Fellow understood the importance of community- led decision making in institutional project settings such as the PCAP at Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira and during the Taonga Preservation Wānanga at the Puketawa marae. The conservators involved in both projects demonstrated their acknowledgment and respect for the knowledge and expertise existing within communities through intentionally relinquishing their expertise to gently make space for community- led discussions and decision making.

Soft skills such as the personal conduct of the conservator and how the conservator chooses to represent themselves and their profession while undertaking community- led conservation project work is critical to a successful and mutually beneficial outcome. The Fellow recommends the conservator continuously reflect on when it's appropriate to relinquish control and support community- led decision making, ask themselves do my actions reflect my values? What small measures can I implement in my own practice to better support community-led conservation?

Some simple actions the conservator can undertake to strengthen their community- engaged practices are...

- Ensure the culturally appropriate object name (in the language of the source community) is used in all conservation documentation.
- Maintain a flexible attitude to traditional object handling protocols and object loan protocols when working directly with communities.
- Avoid attempts to rigidly apply the conventions of traditional museum conservation when working in a community- engaged conservation setting. Often these conventions do not suit the setting. Be open to unexpected change, be self- reflective and accept possible re- directions of your plans.
- Relinquish expertise where appropriate. Acknowledge, equally value, and trust the expertise and tacit knowledge existing in source communities. Demonstrate respect in your actions by making space for others expertise. It doesn't cost anything to take a step back, listen and work towards a preservation/conservation outcome that everyone can be proud of.

Approach- based Recommendation 3: Putting People at the Centre of Conservation Activities.

The Fellow encountered multiple excellent examples where conservators were putting people at the centre of conservation activities.

This notion was most clearly demonstrated in the collection care resources that were distributed during the Taonga Preservation Wānanga. These resources (digital and hardcopy) were developed by the National Preservation Office NZ and written in te reo Māori. The literature provides the Māori community with useful and relevant guidance on preserving their collections. The literature used examples of types of taonga that were relevant to the source community and that would typically be found in a marae. The resources offered practical collection care advice that could be realistically implemented in a domestic, community museum or marae setting.

The Fellow recommends conservators working in large public cultural heritage institutions seek organisational support to develop similar resources. Most cultural institutions in Australia provide some form of collection care advice on their websites. However, it is usually in English only and uses examples of objects that may be less relevant to diverse non- European audiences.

These resources could be co- developed by a conservator, museum staff and members of the relevant source community. The resources should use examples of collection objects that might typically originate from that community and be written in the language spoken in that community.

The Fellow also encountered an expression of putting people at the centre of conservation activities while speaking to staff involved in the PCAP at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. Williams and Samu Tui discussed the intentional open layout design of the

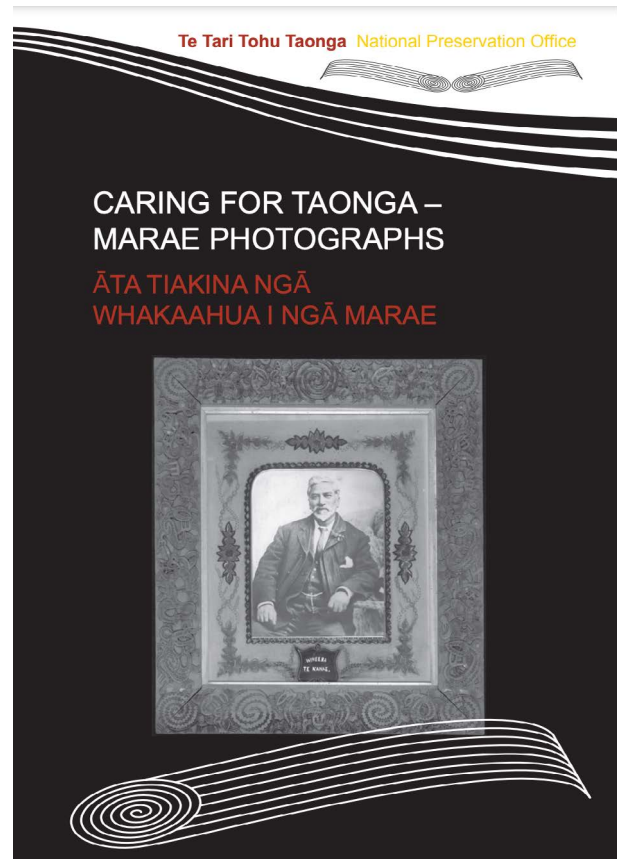


Figure 14. An example of collection care resources developed specifically for the Māori community that were distributed in hardcopy during the workshop. (Image courtesy of the National Preservation Office 2022)

“Collections Hub”. The “Hub” design enabled collaboration and cross pollination of ideas between conservators and community members, created private spaces for culturally sensitive knowledge to be discussed and encouraged a spirit of togetherness and shared achievement when working in the space.

32

The Fellow believes there is opportunity for conservators, working in an institutional setting and directly with a source community, to design their workspaces in a way that welcomes community and encourages participation in conservation activities, robust discussions and sharing of ideas. Such design changes don't need to be drastic or costly.

- Can workbenches be set out in a formation that encourages movement around the workspace. Does the placement of the workbench facilitate equal and easy access and viewing of the objects?
- Is the physical set up flexible? Can it be easily reorganised should the project priorities change?
- Are there dedicated peaceful and private spaces for sensitive conversations?
- Are there spaces for ceremonies, rituals, or other cultural practices within the workspace?
- Is the conservator's workbench in a location where community members can observe and converse with the conservator while they undertake specialised conservation work?

The Fellow recommends conservators put people at the centre of their practice by carefully considering the design of their working spaces and how they might better welcome community members into the space.



Figure 15. The Fellow with conservators, workshop participants and a taonga from the Puketawa Marae collection. (Photographed by Norm Heke 2022)

7. Conclusion

Working as a conservator in an institutional setting and integrating a community- engaged, people- centred approach into everyday practice is challenging. Targeted opportunities are rare. Conservators, like any other public servant, are beholden to limited project budgets, tight deadlines, and the priority delivery of broader organisational objectives that may not allow space to directly engage with source communities. The Fellow acknowledges these challenges.

34

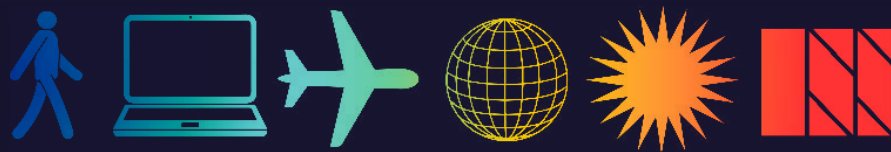
Learning and developing skill as a conservator with expertise in community- led conservation is cumulative, is about developing soft skills/interpersonal skills as well as practical skills and actively extends over the full career of the conservator.

Formal study, participating in internships, volunteer projects, institutionally or privately supported professional development activities, work integrated learning, and lived experience all play a critical role in building this field of expertise.

For the Fellow, undertaking the Fellowship demonstrated that the interested conservator must proactively and intentionally pursue opportunities to strengthen their practice in community- engaged conservation activities because small changes to the everyday practices of the conservator can have a big impact.

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