

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL NATURAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS (BUSHFIRES)

28 APRIL 2020

Question 1: In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and volunteer-run community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia. Our 1400 members represent thousands of individual professionals through the large institutions and thousands more individual volunteers. All of our members are linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve, are key parts of Australia's physical and social infrastructure, and contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

AMaGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. This submission draws both on the lived experience of our galleries and museums during the recent bushfires emergency, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards. We address issues relating to areas covered by items b, f and g in the Letters Patent. The bulk of our response is therefore made in response to Question 3 of the submission template: What needs to change?

During natural disasters and extreme weather events, cultural organisations are vulnerable. A number of those which had disaster preparedness plans in place were able to execute these in time. An outstanding example is Bundanon, the historic homestead/art gallery near Nowra in southern NSW, which evacuated its most valuable artworks to Sydney before the fires hit, and was a key focus for local firefighters who put "significant resources" into successfully protecting the property. Federal and state grants are now funding the construction of a new fire-proof gallery. See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-17/bushfire-risk-triggers-arthur-boyd-picasso-art-relocation/11871004>

Many museums, galleries and historic sites were in areas affected by bushfires, including by hazardous levels of smoke. A small number of museums were destroyed completely, such as the Genoa Schoolhouse Museum at Mallacoota in Victoria, and the Mogo Machinery Museum in NSW. A much greater number of historic sites and open-air museums were lost, such as the Kiandra Heritage Precinct, and 16 historic huts in Kosciuszko, all in NSW.

Many organisations in the threatened areas took remedial action to prevent their works being damaged or destroyed, such as moving them into storage or taking other action, such as short-term closures.

Question 2: In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

It is critical to understand the cumulative impact that the extended season of bushfires and other climate-change induced environmental conditions had on the museum and gallery sector and their communities. Years of inadequate funding, lack of joined up disaster preparedness and response plans between national, state and local governments, piecemeal infrastructure planning, and the inadequacies of buildings, plant and appropriate policies (such as when to close because of the appalling air quality due to smoke) were all exposed.

For example, in Canberra, the hazardous nature of the air quality led to the ad-hoc closing of national institutions, revealing the inhibiting lack of policy guidance and elevated levels of concern for staff, visitors and the objects and artworks.

Survey results show that many smaller organisations had insufficient resources to cope with a disaster on the scale seen during the summer period. See <http://blueshieldaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Impact-of-Fire-and-Storm-Events-on-GLAM-Institutions-in-Australia-2020.pdf>

The survey report concludes that “The scale of the bushfire and storm disasters experienced from 1 November 2019 to 31 January 2020 across Australia caught everyone by surprise. It highlighted weaknesses in disaster preparedness and business continuity planning and provided the impetus to revisit these with increased understanding.”

The cumulative impact of disasters and under-resourcing has increased hugely with the advent of COVID-19 since March 2020. Work to support and help re-build bushfire-affected communities and organisations must not be relegated, rather it is even more important to understand and support comprehensive recovery plans for these areas.

Question 3: In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Cultural institutions are central to wellbeing, identity, and maintaining social cohesion. They connect Australians with the stories, art, heritage and histories of their community at a local, regional and national level. They are also critical contributors to economies at every level. For example, arts are a key driver of regional tourism, with more domestic tourists attending the arts than organised sport, amusement parks or wineries. See <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/domestic-arts-tourism-connecting-the-country/>

Change needs to occur both in the short and longer term, and encompasses policy, co-ordination, land management, infrastructure planning, and priority investments. There are opportunities to both repair and create anew.

Short term:

The critical things that are needed as soon as possible in affected communities are: artists' support; conservation of collections; oral history projects and provision for historical societies, museums and libraries to offer other cultural outreach and community re-building activities; and support for cultural organisations to undertake systematic planning. Such planning would

include assessments of damage, business planning, collections management and acquisitions, including digital access, disaster preparedness, and community engagement. Support includes providing professional expertise, such as conservation advice, and access to resources. This is all quite apart from the work required on the conservation of historic sites and the natural environment.

Longer term:

National Policy

We strongly recommend the development by the Commonwealth of a confident and aspirational national cultural policy framework that sets aims and priorities, delineates roles, undertakes research and enables funding for implementation. It should include cross-governmental strategies and programs and link to state and local government strategies. It should also include support for Australia's cultural institutions to contribute to the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

As with other national policy making (for example in industry or social policy) a national cultural policy both demonstrates the public value of culture and provides a structure for strategic investment and impact. **It would provide a framework for the inclusion of cultural voices in government responses to emergencies and natural disasters.** In particular, an injection of targeted funding for long term strategic planning for resilience and sustainability is now required.

Increased funding to accelerate the digitisation programs of work by the national cultural institutions is also critical, both in terms of better disaster mitigation but also in providing better online content during other times of crisis, such as the current pandemic.

National Co-ordination of Cultural Recovery in Disaster Responses

These sorts of disastrous events will recur. National co-ordination in disaster recovery for cultural organisations will be required. A proven model is the United States' Heritage Emergency National Task Force (HENTF), which is co-sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Smithsonian Institution. It is a partnership of 42 national service organizations and federal agencies. See <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/hentf/> and for an account of how and why it was formed, see <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-haitis-devastating-earthquake-prompted-worldwide-effort-safeguard-cultural-heritage-180973942/>

Cultural projects also play major roles in regeneration, adaptive reuse of heritage assets and tourism development. Latest research suggests this works best as part of integrated planning.

Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and Land Management

There is a growing understanding of the importance of traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous ways of managing land: "caring for country". Many museums are adopting, researching and promoting Indigenous environmental knowledge and management – through re-interpreting their collections and looking out to country to better support collections, communicating Indigenous science, culture, ways of knowing and practices

alongside Western concepts, having an eco-system approach to research, and more sharing of knowledge and information. Indigenous land and waterways management is clearly necessary to better understand, conserve and protect the environment.

The directors of Australia's leading natural history museums state *that "The bushfire climate change crisis has reinforced that we have much to learn from our First Nations people and that First Nations understandings of our natural species and land management is to be respected, understood and embraced in our research."*

Further, providing support to organisations in bushfire-affected communities to implement relevant actions in the 10-year sector plan *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries* would be a highly effective strategy for community rebuilding and environmental resilience and sustainability. See <https://www.amaga.org.au/indigenous>

State Policy

The intermittent and comparatively low level of Commonwealth, state and local support and interest in the museum and gallery sector is reflected in both the lack of strategic planning for the sector and in the ongoing poverty and struggle of many regional and local community museums, galleries and keeping places.

Most museums in Australia are small, volunteer-managed community organisations which are embedded in their local communities and provide a range of social and economic benefits, including a sense of belonging to their community, and of contributing to society. These museums are generally woefully under-resourced. **One of the most useful and cost-effective actions that governments at all levels could do for rebuilding disaster-affected communities is to provide professional advice and an adequate level of funding support for these and similar arts, heritage and cultural organisations in the regions.**

There are opportunities to make strategic national and state investments in digital access to the full range of collections large and small. Strategies and support for the digitisation of collections in regional and community galleries and museums would also be an invaluable contribution to Australians' wellbeing and social engagement and contribute to community rebuilding.

In sum, there is a need for a more coherent and equitable cultural strategy for Australia that guides and prioritises both capital and capability investment in all levels of cultural activity, and in this case especially digital technologies and capacity building for institutions and communities.

Disaster Planning included in Infrastructure Planning

Some assets are irreplaceable – these include the collections held in museums, galleries and historical societies. Infrastructure planning must include programs to disaster proof our arts and heritage institutions and communities. The cultural impact of natural and human made disaster can be catastrophic. The increasing rate of climate-induced destruction of irreplaceable cultural collections, particularly in regional Australia, must be recognised and

local organisations need advice and support to both reduce the risk and mitigate the consequences. Planning should include:

- o Resources for disaster planning and disaster response capabilities nation-wide
- o Formal and funded linkages between national, state and local capacities

The challenges posed by climate change, a re-ordering of the world economy, years-long cumulative under-investment in infrastructure, and widely variable service delivery between urban, regional and remote areas, necessitate newer ways of thinking about and assessing the infrastructure needs of Australians. In particular, a user-centred focus on the cultural as well as physical needs and aspirations of local communities is critical.

Priority National and State Investments

1. *Digitisation of collections*

Museums and galleries hold a wealth of knowledge in their collections. A longer term investment in helping museums, galleries and historical societies to provide digital access would speed up the current erratic and under-funded process and help mitigate against catastrophic losses caused by future disasters. A **national investment plan** would include:

- o the adoption of national, state, territory and local government digital access to collections strategies and plans, which link to a national collaborative research infrastructure plan
- o initiatives to help build the capacity of smaller cultural institutions
- o dedicated funding for digitisation and digital access at every level
- o support for state digital collections platforms such as Victorian Collections and WA Collections
- o steady support for the National Library of Australia's Trove platform

2. *Biodiversity research*

Australia's leading natural history museums hold invaluable reference collections for the nation. They are "*the 'ark' of information on Australian species with collections that date back as early as the 1850s... The impact of the recent fires on Australia's biodiversity is on a scale not previously seen since record-keeping began...*"

These great state institutions are committed to finding out how species have been affected, to implementing and supporting programs to restore those species that can be saved, and to engaging the public in mitigation strategies. **This requires increased funding and co-ordinated national action.** See <https://australianmuseum.net.au/about/organisation/media-centre/statement-australia-natural-history-museum-directors/>

3. *Purpose built safe storage*

Digitisation of collections will retain some critical information, however, museum and gallery collections - objects, artworks and documents – need protection through secure storage facilities. These can be purpose built at the larger institutions, or co-located with others in specific local government premises. Assistance will be required for transport as well as construction and security.

Question 4: Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

AMaGA is a founding member and co-convenor of GLAM Peak, a group of the peak representative national bodies for galleries, libraries, archives, museums, historical societies and humanities research in Australia. The major focus to date has been recognising the importance of digital access to collections and carrying out a range of activities in support of this national priority. These include drafting the national framework for digital access to collections, and developing a suite of tools, workshop materials, case studies and guidelines.

GLAM Peak advocates for strategies and support for the digitisation of collections in cultural collecting institutions, in particular, regional and remote galleries, museums and keeping places. See <http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/glam-peak>

The GLAM sector acts through Blue Shield Australia, the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross, to promote disaster preparedness and share learnings about disaster response and recovery. See <http://blueshieldaustralia.org.au/>

In January 2020 AMaGA convened the *Bushfires / Climate Change Cultural Response Roundtable – National Organisations* to provide advocacy, communication and support through the Australian disaster season on behalf of the cultural and creative arts sectors. The Roundtable asked Blue Shield Australia to co-ordinate a survey of the impact of the emergency events, and this submission has drawn upon the survey data. See <http://blueshieldaustralia.org.au/news/impact-of-fire-and-storm-events-on-glam-institutions-2020/>

Finally, AMaGA endorses the submissions to this Inquiry by fellow members of GLAM Peak and the Cultural Response Roundtable, and by Blue Shield Australia.

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