



Version Control

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1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework to guide the care, management, and return of secret and/or sacred materials.

2. SCOPE

The Policy applies to all Western Australian Museum employees (whether by way of appointment, secondment, casual contract, fixed term contract or traineeship. It also extends to Honorary Associates, Research Associates, Fellows, volunteers, and members of the Board of Trustees. The policy is a publicly accessible document and is available to members of the public on the museum website and will be supplied on request.

3. DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this document, the following definitions apply:

Term	Definition
Custodial Care	An arrangement where an individual, community, or organisation has requested the Museum holds an object on their behalf for the purpose of care and storage. This may be on a short or long term basis but does not involve a transfer of ownership to the Museum. Most often used in reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections.
Indigenous Repatriation Program	A program administered by the Australian Government Office for the Arts to support the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and secret and/or sacred materials from Australian and overseas collections to their Traditional Owners
Provenance	The full history and chain of ownership of an object from its creation or discovery to the present day.
Repatriation	The unconditional return of the physical ancestral human remains and/or secret and/or sacred objects, to the custodians entitled by traditional and/or customary law and/or Australian law, to care for them. Repatriation can also include the return of records and archives associated with the object/s.
Secret and/or sacred materials	Objects that are secret or sacred to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Peoples and therefore have access restrictions placed upon them based on knowledge

	recognised by custom and ceremony as established by Traditional Owners, and often determined by gender
State Collection	The permanent accessioned collections of the Western Australian Museum, central to its mission of research, exhibition, and community engagement.

4. POLICY STATEMENT

The Museum recognises that secret and/or sacred materials are significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that such materials need to be managed in a culturally responsible manner. The Museum is committed to the ethical care of such materials while they are in the Museum's custodianship, and to working with source communities to achieve their return. No secret and/or sacred materials form part of the State Collection.

The Museum is an eligible museum and active participant in the Federal Government's Indigenous Repatriation Program.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES

Board of Trustees

Responsible for:

Final decision on secret and/or sacred materials proposed for deaccession and return.

Chief Executive Officer

Responsible for:

- eApplying and interpreting this policy, adjudicating on contentious issues and presenting proposals for deaccession and return of secret and/or sacred materials to the Board of Trustees.

Director Culture and Communities

Responsible for:

- Ensuring compliance with this policy by Culture and Communities staff
- Providing support for activities associated with the identification and return of secret and/or sacred materials

Head of Department, Anthropology & Archaeology

Responsible for:

- Undertaking provenance research to establish source communities for secret and/or sacred items in the Museum's care;
- Liaising with communities to inform them of secret and/or sacred items in the Museum's care;
- Working with communities to prepare for the return of secret and/or sacred items or ongoing care by the Museum;
- Providing access to source communities to secret and/or sacred items when requested by community representatives.

Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adviser

Responsible for:

- Advising on community contacts and consultation where appropriate
- Reporting to and informing the WA Museum Aboriginal Advisory Committee of activities associated with secret and/or sacred material where appropriate

Curatorial staff, Anthropology & Archaeology

Responsible for:

- Assisting the Head of Department in researching secret and/or sacred material
- Liaising with communities and external consultants
- Assisting with events or community visits related to secret and/or sacred material

6. LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE CONTEXT

Legislation and regulations

- *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*
- *Museum Act 1969*
- *Privacy and Responsible Sharing of Information Act 2024*
- *Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986*
- *State Records Act 2000 (WA)*
- *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970 (1970 UNESCO Convention)*

Creative Industries Tourism and Sport policies, procedures and guidelines

- Code of Conduct

Department / Museum policies, procedures and guidelines

- Ancestral Remains Policy
- Deaccession and Disposal Policy

- Loans Policy and Procedures
- Non-Indigenous Human Remains Policy
- Return of Cultural Materials Policy
- Departmental Procedures

Other related documents

- Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities; principles and guidelines for Australian Museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage (Australian Museum and Galleries Association)
- International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics
- National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries (2023)

7. PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

7.1 Acquisition and display

The Museum does not actively seek to acquire secret and/or sacred materials for the State Collection. It may do so in exceptional circumstances in order to remove them from potential damage, from private collections or general circulation, in which instance secret and/or sacred materials will be held by the Museum until they can be returned to the relevant custodians, or remain within the care of the Museum at the community's request. They will not generally be accessioned into the State Collection.

The Museum will not place secret and/or sacred materials in any display, nor will it make them available for display by other organisations, or for general research, except where that research contributes to establishing provenance, or identity.

7.2 Housing of secret and/or sacred materials

Secret and/or sacred materials and associated documentation will be housed in a secure area, separate from the Museum's general collection. They will be afforded the same care as that given to all other areas of the collection.

Secret and/or sacred materials will be housed in appropriate storage and environmental conditions. Where possible, secret and/or sacred material will be housed according to cultural origins and will be clearly traceable to a particular storage location.

7.3 Access

Only appropriate staff, or individuals directly involved with the repatriation program, or responsible for the ongoing care of secret and/or sacred materials will have access to the storage area. Appropriateness will be determined on factors such as gender and cultural authority. Similarly, access will be provided in culturally appropriate ways.

Upon request, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or their authorised representatives of appropriate gender, will have access to the secret and/or sacred storage area. Aboriginal people or their authorised representatives will also have access to any documentation associated with that community's area of responsibility. Requests to access the secret and/or sacred store should be made in writing or by telephone no less than five days prior to the visit.

No independent researcher may access the secret and/or sacred store without first obtaining permission from senior initiated men or women, as appropriate, from the relevant community relating to the collections that they might wish to view. All external visitors to the store will be recorded in a visitor register.

7.4 Conduct

Any person entering the secret and/or sacred storage area or participating in activities associated with the return of secret and/or sacred items, shall behave respectfully. Any person considered to be behaving disrespectfully will be required to leave the storage area immediately.

7.5 Research on secret and/or sacred materials

All research conducted in relation to secret and/or sacred materials will comply with recognised and appropriate ethical research guidelines.

The Museum will conduct appropriate and diligent research on secret and/or sacred materials in its care in order to establish source communities where items are unprovenanced, or poorly provenanced.

This provenance research will not damage or seek to destroy secret and/or sacred materials or parts thereof and will be restricted to non-invasive methods and archival research.

No data associated with secret and/or sacred materials will be made public without the consent of the relevant community.

7.6 Custodial care

The Museum may hold secret and/or sacred materials on behalf of communities or individuals upon request. Such arrangements will be managed through a Custodial Care Agreement, and the materials will be governed by all relevant clauses of this policy. The materials continue to be the property of the lodging party, who may request the return of these at any time.

Further details on Custodial Care Agreements can be found in the Loans Policy.

7.7 Return

The Museum will work with senior men or women from relevant representative bodies to return secret and/or sacred materials to source communities on request, subject to initial research or other documentary evidence establishing provenance.

The Museum will not place conditions on communities with regards to secret and/or sacred materials which are returned.

The senior initiated men, or women, as appropriate, from the group or area from which the materials originated will determine what will happen to these on their return.

The Museum shall provide copies of all available relevant documentation associated with materials being returned to the relevant communities.

The Museum will retain copies of all documentation on materials that have been returned.