

A Proposed Assessment Framework for Responsible Collections Management

Definitions:

For the purpose of this session we are using the term “collection(s)” to refer to site assemblages, curated artifact groups, antiquarian and selected artifact groups, understanding that there are material differences in the way collections are formed.

The entirety of data pertaining to a collection (archives, oral histories etc) is termed the archaeological record.

Please note that the bibliography which underpins this document is listed on the Forum web pages, rather than cited within the text.

Introduction

The tone of this document is unapologetically stark. The collections “crisis” that has been hanging over us for decades has been addressed numerous times, but not resolved in any pragmatic way. It is an aspect of the discipline of archaeology that we feel entitled to operate outside the parameters of financial accountability, and that our task as stewards elevates us above the fray. No discipline can protect its “products” from commoditization at some level, and in our case, the politics and pragmatics of warehousing the past are affecting how we collect, what we collect, where, and for how long. The reality of curation has not been matched by a concurrent adjustment of our ethical codes, which offer us moral guidance as ethically minded persons, but do not offer practical guidance on making ethical decisions about collections.

Although this document argues for a public reorientation towards accepting the need for culling and/or deaccession, we are not advocating or encouraging collections disposal on its own merits. Deaccession needs to enter the equation more fully as one of a suite of solutions to managing collections under difficult financial or logistical circumstances. What needs to be argued for even more forcefully than has been done in the past is the need continually to add value to existing collections, and to protect their potential through better documentation and recording. The notion of deaccession cannot even be considered, ethically or otherwise, without a commitment to full record-keeping. Other archaeological organizations such as Digital Antiquity have been advocating this for years, but in the context of collections deaccession it is fundamental to decision making. As we present the checklists for collections “assessment”, it will be apparent that the decision process is predicated on recorded archaeological, ethnic, or historiographical context for artifacts as a key step in collections evaluation.

Not only is initial recording essential, but collections data require periodic updating. Their enduring value is a direct function of their enduring accessibility¹, and that access translates directly into effective curation and usage. The reason why many older collections are now of limited use is because they were not periodically reviewed and updated, with their comparability maintained. This data continuum marks out the difference between “active” and “dormant” collections; it should be our common objective to keep different kinds of collections active through research, outreach, and community use. The role of collections manager might better be described as “collections assessor”. But the cost and manpower implications of managing active collections (even if they are only a component of the whole in an

¹ Meaning, in plain terms, that a collection facility has available records that offer a realistic sense of what a particular collection consists of, and that the materials can be located reliably.

institution), brings us back to the issue of limited resources, and deaccession. The discussion is therefore grounded in a wider argument for the best use of collections, for their ongoing management, and for the development of a best practice approach to curation.

Below, we briefly re-examine the normative ethical statements that apply to collections management, and argue for adjustments to their underlying assumptions. These statements, although widely subverted in reality and generally understood as guidance principles, leave the discipline exposed to serious criticisms. It is not the intention here to engage with the ethics statements, but to make the argument that it is possible to redefine stewardship as a contingent responsibility, and one which must include taking hard decisions about the things we steward. Again, in the present reality, our duties (ethical and practical) are to “save” what we can – especially information pertaining to collections – and to ensure that we work to preserve its utility going forward. It is in this context that we are working towards assessment tools for collections.

The crisis and historical archaeology

For decades, archaeologists in North America and elsewhere have been expressing their concern over the collections crisis. While often articulated as a single problem, there are in fact several variants that can be identified. These would include inadequate space to house collections, improper storage and curation of collections, uncritical accumulation of new collections, inadequate documentation and recording, and underutilization of existing collections, to name a few.

Furthermore, the problem facing historical archaeology is that archaeologists and/or collections managers are imposing their own solutions to the challenges of collections management, on a case-by-case basis. Such actions range from regional repositories not accepting later historical period collections, arbitrary decisions about site sampling and data selection, to individual archaeologists deciding that on-site reburial in sealed containers constituted adequate curation. While it is accepted that in certain cases these may be the best actions after having recorded relevant information, currently there is no consistent framework for arriving at these actions through informed decision-making.

Historical archaeology also has become a source of concern for later historical periods and industrially manufactured objects. An area for improvement in this sector is the more thorough recording of context and related details of mass produced or manufactured objects, in order to produce good ranges of examples for curation, without an overload of artifacts. Since active selection already takes place with later historical site assemblages, it is a matter of some urgency to work with field archaeologists to develop more robust assessment procedures.

The purpose of this session document is to propose that the assessment framework we will be delivering at the SHA (supported by and under the ethical guidelines of SHA) could provide historical archaeologists, museum specialists and collections managers with a greater degree of stability in making decisions, and a greater consistency in assessing objects and collections. The proposed assessment framework is intended to demonstrate both externally and internally that we have procedures in place that enable us to justify protection for collections which have been proactively assessed, while at the same time make responsible choices on deaccession of material.

What is an assessment?

In cases where it will be impossible to retain an entire body of material in deposit for the foreseeable future, an archaeological assessment – of a site assemblage, an existing collection, or of groups of related materials – is meant to be a transparent, replicatable, and stable means of making decisions about what

to select for retention. Using a checklist approach, a concept which we will be introducing at the SHA Forum, an assessment enables responsible parties to ascribe a collection's potential to contribute to understandings of the past. The assessment checklist is based on questions that help produce localized outcomes for collections management. We are hoping that this approach avoids the frequently cited problem of not being able to provide professional bodies with a broad enough ethical or procedural code that encompasses all possible variants.

What justifies using an assessment framework to evaluate collections?

It is clear from the many documents circulating among professional organizations (see related web pages) that we now have to tackle the most pressing and difficult challenge of our time, confronting the potential of the archaeological record in order to make decisions about what we can afford to preserve. While the broader implications are outside the scope of this exercise, developing an “operating system” for making decisions about selection, retention, or disposal of archaeological collections needs to be addressed as a top priority.

The current crisis is caused by many related factors which have accumulated over time, but has resulted in a stark reality.

1. *Storage facilities are running out of space.* There is a finite amount of storage space available, and little appetite or cash to provide more. Financially, we cannot afford to keep current collection populations at their present or projected levels.
2. *We cannot keep everything that is excavated.* Lack of storage space means we are forced to reconsider our collecting and curating policies for field assemblages.
3. *We may have to deaccession parts of old, dormant, or antiquarian collections.* It is critical to develop procedures for assessing the integrity, comparability, and other potential value of old collections, based not only on the related archaeological record but their cultural values.
4. *We can no longer justify retention of an entire collection purely on the basis that it is a “representative” sample, or a total population; this is no longer a valid working brief.*

Below we offer a brief summary of the main beliefs that have been shaped by our Ethics Codes, and a response to these positions.

The principal ethical positions that affect collections management

The principal weaknesses in our ethics of conservation arise from a fundamental, if contested notion, namely that **significance is inherent in the archaeological record**. There is a long pedigree for the notion of the artifact being held to “encode” meanings. It can be argued, however, as below, that we ascribe meaning in the present through archaeological practice that actively creates it and that the objects are located in the present.

Three interlinked ethical duties are derived from this idea of inherent meaning in the archaeological record, each of which is critically examined below. While we accept that our statements can be challenged, we have chosen to use them as working guidelines, given the urgency of the task. If we

unpack these statements we have a better chance of reintegrating current practice with our ethical positions: what we want to achieve is an adherence to an ethical code based on present knowledge.

1. **We are obligated to “preserve the past”.** The archaeological record is an accident of history. We have preserved a random sample of historic material, notwithstanding our belief in its representativeness: there is no way of knowing whether it is representative of past existence. The remains of the past that we curate represent our choices arising from our recent social history, and only incidentally give us glimpses of the past. We cannot presume to know what past societies or individuals thought was important about their own culture, and what they might have wanted us to understand about them.

2. **We are obligated to preserve the past “for future generations”.** The scientific arguments for an increasing technical capability to extract data from objects, together with the belief that our discipline is on a linear path to an ever-improving understanding of past peoples, encourages us to preserve the entirety of the record for use by future specialists and stakeholders. The heritage argument for preserving the past as part of identity maintenance is also used to argue for its preservation for the use of future generations’ identities. These arguments together, embedded in the belief of inherent significance, have underpinned the calls for total retention of the archaeological record.

The arguments for retention for future use are based on a set of assumptions. We do not know what the interests of stakeholder communities will be in the future, and whether they will find the information to be of significance in the same way that we do in the present. . To the extent that our cumulative database is an accident of history, and not an “entirety” or a “complete sample” of anything, its use in the future will be as limited to conjecture as it is in the present.

From precedent, we can say that the collections of 100 years ago are no longer regarded with the same interest as they were then, because of changes in the ways artifacts and collections were recorded, classified and interpreted; or their value for us will have shifted because of the accumulation of data from later periods; or because the material has deteriorated through normal physical processes. We can only hazard a guess as to the interests of archaeologists and other stakeholders 100 years into the future. The future utility of the current archaeological record cannot be assessed.

However, a caveat - representations by descendant communities about future significance of objects require a different level of concern and approach. Accepting that Indigenous identity is transmitted through knowledge and practice, in part materially, ensuring that “future” value is encapsulated in curated collections becomes critical. The underlying logistical issues remain the same, but the criteria for assessment need to be adjusted.

3. **We are obligated to preserve the past for future generations “in perpetuity”.** The word *perpetuity* points to the overarching problem. Institutions or state organizations in the main are taking on the role of stewards and custodians because of their management capacity. Because the stewardship role is in held in perpetuity, it follows that they are morally obliged to steward assets in perpetuity. The language of stewardship expressly denies the right to dispose or destroy. Yet on a daily basis, archaeologists and heritage managers, stakeholders and participants, select out, use up, and dispose of archaeological artifacts.

What constitutes responsible behavior with respect to collections management?

In some regards the situation with collections management is analogous to that of archivists over the past fifty years. When confronted with an unimaginable explosion of records archivists were effectively “...transformed from passively mediating a sacred compact among the past, present, and future to actively mediating this trust by recognizing in the present what was significant from the past and preserving this core body of documents while destroying the rest” (Boles 2005:4).

But the decision-making implications of our position as one of the principal, but not exclusive, stakeholder groups are broader than for archival work, because we are charged with management of archaeological collections that often involve collaborative decision-making and co-management.

When it comes to historical collections, we generally can make decisions on behalf of those stakeholders who have entrusted us as stewards. When it comes to historical period Indigenous, mixed, or ethnic material, however, the groups most directly implicated in the process of value formation and ascription are archaeologists (“specialists”) and descendant communities; it is these two groups who have the clearest line of de facto stewardship, and their relative abilities to make decisions are based on different knowledge sources and cognitive values that inform the process. Co-management initially will involve the process of separate assessment routes, and the negotiation between specialist and localized knowledge – a “politics of location” (see Meskell and Pels 2005:13, 63).

Responsible behavior is therefore connected to fulfilling our obligations not only to, document, perform assessments on, and preserve as much of, the archaeological record as we can practically support, but to actively accommodate any key stakeholders’ assessments and concerns as part of the process.

Note: this document constitutes a basis for the tools that will be presented and worked on at the SHA Forum. It will be briefly discussed in the opening session, and some paper copies will be made available for consultation.