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**Promoting Preservation awareness in New Zealand:
the role of the National Preservation Office, Te Tari
Tohu Taonga**

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ABSTRACT

In 1999, the National Library of New Zealand set up a National Preservation Office (in Maori Te Tari Tohu Taonga), within a bi-cultural model. This paper examines a number of case studies to show how the Office has worked within New Zealand and how effective it has been in promoting preservation awareness. It focuses on three principles: fostering relationships with communities, imparting accurate and up to date information, and demonstrating the importance of preservation to continuing access for collections.

Kia ora tatou

Greetings from New Zealand, Aotearoa the land of the long white cloud. Geographically New Zealand is in the farthest corner of the planet and is surrounded by the vast waters of the Pacific Ocean which contains myriad island nations each with a distinct language and culture. Even though New Zealand is almost three times the size of the Republic of Korea it has a population of just on four million people. The indigenous people of New Zealand are Māori and they make up approximately 15% of the population. About 8% are Pacific Islanders. The remainder of the population are mainly descendants of nineteenth century immigrants from the United Kingdom. For such a small population New Zealand has a large range of libraries and other cultural institutions. As well as traditional libraries and archive repositories

there are hundreds of collections held by tribal or family groups known as iwi or hapu in Māori. Often these collections are in isolated rural areas.

The National Library of New Zealand is responsible for collecting and preserving the national documentary heritage. Recently this has included a statutory obligation to also preserve electronic material unique to New Zealand. Even though the National Library has a well equipped conservation lab caring for the collections it was aware that much of the nation's heritage was in collections with no access to conservators or to conservation advice. It was because of this realisation that the National Library of New Zealand set up the National Preservation Office in 1999. Its Māori name is Te Tari Tohu Taonga. It was set up within a bi-cultural model to reflect the importance of Māori culture both within a broader New Zealand context and specifically within the commitment of the National Library. Two conservators were appointed, one conservator being Māori.

Cultural conservation is a relatively new discipline in New Zealand and even now there are only about seventy conservators registered with the local professional body. Appreciation of cultural conservation, including that of the built heritage has been curiously slow in New Zealand. However with the increasing realisation since the seventies of New Zealand having a distinct cultural identity there has been an increasing interest in documentary heritage collections. As well as libraries, many museums and historical societies have been set up, all with the intent of preserving New Zealand identity. It is against this backdrop that the National Preservation Office was established. Its declared aim was the raising of preservation awareness amidst the New Zealand community.

In this paper a number of case studies will be briefly examined to show how the Office has worked within New Zealand and how effective it has been in promoting preservation awareness. Three underlying guiding principles have informed the work and these will be demonstrated through case studies. Key to the effective working has been the importance of fostering relationships with communities. The National Library views this as crucial in addressing the care and preservation of collections. Linked to this has been the concern of the National Preservation Office to care for collections within context, to empower often small communities to care for their own material. Part of this has been demonstrating to communities the practicality of looking after their own collections.

The second principle has been that of imparting accurate and up to date information. Unfortunately inaccurate information relating to conservation often lingers. For example many small institutions are still trying to impose rigid environmental standards that bear no relevance to current research.

The third principle relates to demonstrating the importance of preservation to continuing access for collections. Often preservation has been seen as antithetical to access.

As the Office is staffed by only two people, it has been crucial to focus on the greatest areas of need. In a general sense we have worked at four levels –through providing an enquiry service, through the provision of different types of workshops, through assessments of collections and through publications.

As the needs were so diffuse in the area of training we decided to focus on key areas.

With an increase in awareness of our identity as a nation there has been a huge increase in the number of places building new libraries and archives. These range from small buildings in the rural landscape to large regional buildings in urban areas. An interesting phenomenon in New Zealand is that preservation awareness is no more developed in big institutions (apart from large national institutions) than small ones. Hence we have focused our attention equally on large institutions. This has had the benefit of some of these bigger places now being able to help smaller places.

In order to address the number of new buildings being built we have run several week long workshops looking at the design of new buildings. We have run these workshops by open invitation but also by targeting key institutions we knew were engaged in building programmes. The advantage of a very small population is that it is relatively easy to manage targeting of specific individuals and institutions.

Key to the operation of the Office has been the engagement of entering into partnerships to help us run our workshops. The first major building workshop was held in Auckland (New Zealand's largest city) in conjunction with Auckland City Library and Auckland Art Gallery. The staff of both institutions played a pivotal role in bringing people together and providing enormous help with constructing and implementing the programme. Being close to Australia we have often also been able to pull on their larger conservation community. We ran this workshop with the Australian Consortium for Heritage Collections.

We took participants through all the essential elements of design needed to create an environment conducive to people and collections. The focus was on empowering participants to understand the whole building process and how to engage with all the professions involved in building programmes. We ran the workshop by looking at case studies of buildings that were being planned. In this way we were able to teach participants to read architectural plans so that they were provided with the appropriate technical background to be able to discuss their building needs with architects and other building professionals.

This workshop also demonstrates the importance of establishing accurate information. In New Zealand as probably elsewhere inaccurate or rather misguided information about crucial areas still lingers. This particularly relates to environmental issues where insistence on trying to achieve impossibly narrow environmental parameters has led to blind faith in air-conditioning. Along with a workshop of this nature we often run a public lecture to underscore the messages we are trying to get across to professional staff. For this workshop we ran a public lecture particularly focussed on architects and students at the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland. The lecture entitled "The Uncomfortable Library and Museum" addressed the importance of looking at design in helping to build passive environmental control. This lecture was very well received and has had lasting benefit for collections through architectural firms being informed about the conservation implications for the design of cultural institutions.

This workshop model was adapted to the needs of Māori communities especially in relationship to recent interest in indigenous cultural centres. This workshop was well attended by a number of people influential in the Māori cultural sector.

To look at another workshop that addresses an entirely different issue, we move from the building environment to focus on the micro world of enclosures for books and documents. As well as there being a real shortage of conservators in New Zealand there is an even greater lack of trained bookbinders. In many libraries in New Zealand particularly in large public and university binderies there is a tiny handful of trained binders. A great concern was the number of inappropriate repairs being carried out on books within special collections. This was a difficult area to address because it was not possible or suitable to provide training for this specialised field.

Bookbinders feel very isolated within libraries because they are not the pejorative profession and in addition there is no local professional group to whom they belong. To address their training needs we held a national symposium for teaching bookbinders a range of special book enclosures. This was a targeted workshop. We brought together binders from all key institutions. Three instructors taught them enclosures and they were given extensive background to the philosophy of minimal intervention and the importance of using enclosures as an alternative to inappropriate repair. We also taught them how to make book supports for exhibitions. This fitted in with a number of workshops we have run for staff on exhibitions.

This symposium was very successful. Most of the binders had never been to a professional course and they very much enjoyed being introduced to enclosures and realising the pivotal role they play in a preservation programme. The implications of this symposium were far reaching with many significant New Zealand collections now being housed in enclosures. Otago University in particular through a student work programme headed by one of the binders on the symposium has housed the whole of the special collections of the University.

As well as ensuring that many books are now housed in enclosures this symposium also ensured that inappropriate repair has been significantly reduced for books in special collections.

To move from the physical form of the book to the digital is the next case study we look at. In the last few years the National Preservation Office has had a strong focus on trying to address digital preservation which involves the process of maintaining access to digital material. We have stressed that it is part of preventive conservation and as such is strongly part of any programme that we carry out.

How to build up capacity within institutions in the area of digital preservation has been difficult to address. We have run a number of one off workshops but it is difficult to tell how successful these are in the long term. In the last year we have concentrated on trying to build up capacity within institutions by holding numerous regional workshops with several people from one institution attending. In some instances we have run workshops for just one institution. We were lucky to have the services in New Zealand of an internationally renowned specialist on digital preservation. The aim of the workshops has been to give people a real grasp of the issues so they can begin implementing sound decisions and actions for the

preservation of their digital materials. Even though we have received very good evaluations from these workshops it is still difficult to judge the long-term effect. The National Library of New Zealand is constructing a Digital Heritage Archive and there is consequently expertise within the library and an awareness of the needs of institutions. They have been very supportive of bringing international courses out to New Zealand and at the end of the year the Digital Preservation course is coming out from Cornell University.

We also get enquiries from the public on digital preservation. To respond to this demand we ran a free public seminar “Keeping Your Digital Stuff” We advertised extensively through the media including interviews on popular radio stations. In addition we targeted groups such as commercial photographers and publishers. The concept of the seminar was roughly based on the very successful open day that was held in Ottawa with the National Library and National Archives.

This half-day seminar was attended by hundreds of people at the National Library of New Zealand. The response was overwhelming. We did not know how many people were going to come as we deliberately did not get people to register because we did not want to place any barriers in the way. This model is now underway for other metropolitan libraries. From this we have also developed a simple digital preservation brochure for the public.

Alongside these focused issue workshops we have also been running a number of workshops throughout New Zealand for small institutions. They are entitled “Maximising Collection Care.” We have called them this to get away from the sometimes negative connotations that preventive conservation can have. These one day workshops cover care and handling. For some time too, we have been concerned that while people learn a lot from workshops it may often be difficult for them to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to the circumstances of their own situation. To overcome this difficulty the conservator taking the workshop visits each of the participants at their own institution. This has been very popular. We have also been successful in running these workshops because we have worked closely with the major regional institution hosting the workshop.

In some of these workshops where the participants are mainly from archival institutions we have also included a day on the management of collections. We see this as crucial. To this end we have also produced a publication “Managing and Preserving Community Archives”. This guide is particularly intended for community archives, such as schools, religious archives and historical societies, which are often run by volunteers.

It is important to point out that all the workshops we hold are open to all institutions, which includes Māori communities. However collections of iwi and hapu often have special requirements in terms of where they are housed and also the intimate way in which they are used. In many cases too it is imperative that Māori collections are visited and advised on by Māori. Hence the appointment of a Māori conservator within the office has been very important. As one of the principles of the office has been to care for collections in context many care and handling workshops have been run on Marae. These workshops have been practical often teaching participants how

to make enclosures for extremely valued material (taonga) This approach has had the advantage of teaching valuable skills while at the same time building on trusted relationships to ensure the long term care of collections.

Many taonga are stored in Marae that are in wooden buildings often elaborately carved. Along with documentary collections, including many important oral history recordings, there are also precious textile collections. Sometimes the preservation of documentary material may be secondary to the concerns of the buildings and textile collections. Collaborative workshops have been held with other Māori conservators from different disciplines. These workshops have treated the building, textiles and paper as a whole thus truly contextualising their collections. Many of the National Preservation publications are printed in Māori.

When the Office was first established one of the major aims of the Office was to get Preservation Management taught as a component of the Masters of Library and Information study – the only University course offered in library studies in New Zealand. After much perseverance this has been offered for the last few years. Unfortunately it is still not a compulsory requirement. The office has not only overseen the setting up of this course but has also set up the programme and taught it. This was to ensure continuity and to foster a positive relationship between the University and the Office. There are many students who have been through this course who are now dispersed throughout libraries. The emphasis of the course has been to provide a platform for participants to make thoughtful decisions about preservation and to see it as an essential component of their work.

Parallel to this has been the teaching on the Te Wananga o Aotearoa (Māori University) for the Information Records Management course. Here the National Preservation Office has been able to introduce preventive conservation with the emphasis being on raising levels of awareness of appropriate preservation. It also offers practical advice suitable to a range of conditions. It focuses on the unique aspects of these collections and the particular issues they may encounter. For example fire is a very real risk because so many of these collections are stored in wooden buildings often in remote areas far away from fire services.

In the last few years the office has extended its outreach work to other parts of the Pacific. This is part of the National Library of New Zealand's commitment to strengthening our connections with cultural organisations in the Pacific. In 2001 Cyclone Heta devastated Niue Island a small coral atoll in the Pacific. The National Preservation Office went to Niue and working with the Niuean staff and volunteers we were able to salvage about 75% of their records.

The experience underscores the importance of appropriate disaster planning for the Pacific. It also reinforces the importance of appropriate building design for cultural institutions in the Pacific.

This issue is the subject of a workshop (organised by the Pacific Museum Association) being held in Vanuatu to which we will contribute our experience to raise the level of awareness in the crucial role building design plays in the preservation of collections.

At the outset of this paper it was proposed that there were three main principles underlying the work of the Office.

These were: the importance of fostering good relationships in the community, the importance of imparting accurate and up-to-date information and the importance of articulating the link between access and preservation.

In addition to these principles there have been structural factors that have contributed to its success. The National Preservation Office sits as a separate business unit within the structure of the National Library. This has worked extremely well giving the office a structural flexibility and fluidity for being able to respond quickly to opportunities. It has also given it an independence that has meant that it has an autonomy in developing innovative programming. The Office has also been strongly supported by management within the library.

The National Preservation Office has also been able to avail itself widely of expertise within the library and also expertise in other cultural institutions. From the outset the Office has worked across the cultural sector being seen as a service for documentary collections wherever they are held. Largely for this reason it has been strongly supported by all parts of the cultural heritage sector. We have also made all our courses as cost affordable as possible.

In all the work of the Office the highest attention has been paid to the quality of the teaching experience. This is central to the functioning of the Office. If we were to distil the essence of the office it is that we want to be able to empower people to realise that even with small resources they can make enormous strides in caring for their material.

Often small, non-costly, well-thought through procedures can be as effective as costly solutions. Advocacy for preservation has to be widely perceived as encompassing all parts of collections. Often preservation is viewed as something daunting, of thousands of books, records and now digital data accumulating at a rapid pace. The custodians of this material often feel an overwhelming responsibility. Our task is to encourage caretakers to delight in these collections. Preservation awareness liberates staff to understand that for all the fragility of this material it also possesses a resilience, if wise and basic measures of care are taken.