

12 Dec 2011

Jonathon O'Dea MP
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Your ref: LAC11/193, Sub No 5

Dear Mr O'Dea

Follow up of Auditor-General's 2010 Financial Audit Reports

Thank you for your letter of 22 November 2011 asking us to provide an estimated completion date for recording the Museum's collection on an electronic database.

The Australian Museum collections date from the 1820s. Paper-based systems were used to record the collections until 2009 when electronic systems were fully integrated. As a result, the Museum has a legacy of more than 180 years of paper-based records to migrate to the electronic database. We estimate that the current collection of more than 18 million specimens and objects would be represented by approximately 3.9 million database records. Much of the collection is databased as 'lots', hence the number of database records does not equal the number of specimens and objects in the collection. We currently have 1.6 million records databased. Based on existing resources and procedures, which generate 25,000 – 30,000 records per year, we estimate that it will take between 77 and 99 years to record the current collections in the database. The magnitude of this challenge is common to all museums that hold collections pre-dating the electronic age.

The Museum has adopted a number of strategies to increase the rate of data capture. Business cases for funding this substantial task were submitted to Treasury by the Museum in 2000, 2002 and 2003. In 2010 we prepared a Business Case through Communities NSW and other cultural agencies to digitise our combined significant State collections. None of these proposals has been successful. The Australian Museum, as lead agency, has submitted a new proposal to Treasury for seed funding to develop a collaborative project with other cultural agencies and we await the results of this proposal.

We have received funding from the Commonwealth to explore innovative solutions to rapid data capture by using volunteers at the Museum and on-line. Pilot projects are underway to assess the viability of this approach. We have also been awarded contracts from the Commonwealth to digitise collections of scientific significance for biodiversity research.

The Australian Museum recognises the importance of electronic data records to improve collection management and collection access. We actively seek opportunities to increase our rate of data capture and will continue to do so.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Frank Howarth', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Frank Howarth
Director