

Submission  
No 154

## INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

**Organisation:** Port Macquarie Museum

**Date received:** 29 August 2016

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## **Submission to the NSW Upper House Inquiry into NSW Museums and Galleries**

This submission makes the following points:

- Museums and Galleries are different and so are their policy , funding and support needs
- The level of funding and support available to volunteer managed museums in NSW is inadequate for any systemic improvement
- Volunteer managed museums have a tendency to accept the present funding situation as they do not want to appear ungrateful, many are simply resigned to the situation
- There is a need for dedicated museum funding across the State, particularly for museum collection management and infrastructure/capital projects
- There is a lack of leadership at a planning and policy level in respect of cultural heritage collections across the State, particularly in regard to collection research, management and access
- NSW is well behind Victoria in terms of progressive leadership and support of community managed and owned collections
- Community owned cultural heritage facilities are falling through the cracks of an unintegrated approach to capital investment and planning
- There is a lack of coordination between all levels of Government, with an assumption that local government will resource community owned collections and museums
- Local governments are abandoning their responsibilities in regard to supporting community owned and operated cultural facilities, if they supported them at all
- The museums sector has failed to substantiate the economic benefit and value of community held cultural material assets. Museums need to speak economic value and language.
- Cultural tourism is important to the NSW visitor economy yet volunteer managed museums are often overlooked in regional destination management planning
- A case study of a regional collaborative project – Our Rivers Our History is provided to demonstrate the tangible benefits of targeted museum project funding

The following documentation supports and evidences these points, drawing on the experiences of the author, our museum and other museums with whom we collaborate.

The author is willing to be a witness at a later hearing of the Inquiry.

Debbie Sommers  
14 August 2016

Port Macquarie Museum

## **Introduction**

The Port Macquarie Museum welcomes the inquiry into the performance and effectiveness of the NSW Government agencies responsible for the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales.

We make this submission as one of almost 300 community run museums in NSW<sup>1</sup>. In terms of NSW Government arts and culture funding priorities we are at the bottom of the list. We receive no operating funding from any level of Government, i.e. Commonwealth, State or Local Government, however we do apply for and receive grants to carry out specific projects such as collection management activities, staff training and development, and grants to assist us in the care and maintenance of our State heritage listed building and additions.

It will be interesting to see how many submissions the inquiry receives. It may be that many volunteer managed museums are concerned about speaking out, concerned that they will lose the meagre support they currently receive. There has not been overwhelming encouragement from our sector generally to make submissions and perhaps some of our sector groups and representative organisations feel that they can speak on our behalf whilst others may feel vulnerable. Volunteer managed museums have the benefit of not being beholden to Government as we do not currently receive any operational funding.

## **Our Credentials**

The Port Macquarie Historical Society was formed in 1956 and opened its first museum in 1957. Since 1960 the Port Macquarie Museum has been located at its State Heritage listed site and opens Monday to Saturday from 9.30am to 4.30pm. The Museum charges admission fees to fund its operating expenditures which include insurance, power, water, building repairs and maintenance, collection management, staff training, exhibitions, etc.

Our mission is to collect, conserve, research, interpret and inform others about the rich and unique cultural heritage of Port Macquarie and the Hastings region. Most of our work focuses around our award winning Museum and collections.

The Society and Museum are managed by a volunteer committee. The Society owns its land, buildings and collections, is not-for-profit and a registered charity. Sustainability is a key and ongoing strategic objective.

The Society and Museum operate with the assistance of 60 staff at any given time, all of them are volunteers. The Port Macquarie Museum attracted 7654 visitors in 2015/16.

In 2016 the Port Macquarie Museum won the North Coast Tourism Award for Cultural Tourism for the third consecutive year. In 2013 the Society was recognised as the Port Macquarie-Hastings Community Group of the Year. It was the recipient of two Museums and Galleries IMAGinE awards in 2010, highly commended in 2012 and received another award in 2015 for its collaborative online project 'Our Rivers Our History'.

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 NSW Museum & Gallery Sector Census and Survey

<http://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/research/nsw-museum-and-gallery-sector-census-and-survey/>

The Port Macquarie Museum is the leading museum on the Mid North Coast and as such also leads the Hastings Museums and Heritage Group and the Museums Australia- Mid North Coast Chapter.

The author of this submission is the Volunteer Curator at the Port Macquarie Museum, Vice-President of the Port Macquarie Historical Society, President of Museums Australia Mid North Coast Chapter, Convenor of the Hastings Museums and Heritage Group, and a member of Museums and Galleries NSW Volunteer Peer Panel. She has been involved in several award winning museum projects on the Mid North Coast and has been the recipient of an individual Museums and Galleries NSW IMAGinE Award for her work in collection documentation. She mentors museum volunteers across the Mid North Coast of NSW and beyond.

### **General Observations about Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Archives**

Over the years, we have heard many proposals and discussions around collections. Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Archives all hold collections. We think that is where the similarities end. The political and lobbying benefits of working together are certainly recognised and provide a stronger voice in an economic environment with many other voices and needs. Perhaps it is time to consider different policies, funding and support programs for each of them.

Museum collections require rigorous cataloguing regimes often including determining provenance and therefore significance. Much of the State's cultural heritage materials are held by volunteer managed museums. Many of those museums are in community owned heritage listed buildings. Volunteer managed museums generally charge an admission fee or fund raise in other ways to pay their operating costs. Unfortunately, fund raising activities take the focus off the important issue of collection management and building maintenance.

In contrast, most gallery collections are smaller and cataloguing is a relatively simple process. Most gallery collection items are by known artists with existing profiles, so there is rarely need to determine significance. Most public galleries are managed by paid professionals. Most public galleries are funded by Councils and their collections are exhibited and stored in purpose built or modified, and well maintained facilities. Most galleries are able to host touring and big ticket exhibitions as they have the physical facilities required to do so. Entry to most Council operated galleries is free.

Library collections are primarily materials common to many libraries. There is an agreed method of cataloguing and all libraries use that standard method. With the exception of our State Library, libraries are not required nor expected to hold onto their collection materials indefinitely. Advances in technology have particularly impacted libraries and many are now branching out into other activities in an endeavour to retain relevance and staffing levels. There is a view amongst some library professionals that they can provide professional support to volunteer managed museums. We strongly disagree.

Archives collections are important and contain unique materials, like museums, that cannot be found in any other place. Some regional archives are associated with libraries, others with museums. The need to catalogue and provide public access to archives has never been

greater, particularly with family history now one of the most popular hobbies around the world.

### **NSW Government Funding, Policy and Support**

Funding from the NSW Government specifically for volunteer managed museums is small and limited to some small grant programs managed by Museums and Galleries of NSW. Grants to assist museums like ours to manage our collections are limited to \$2,000 and under, with museums only able to receive one grant under the program per year. Development Grants under the same program provide for a small number of grants up to \$7500.

Our Museum has been a regular and successful applicant under the program however the total program amounted to \$85082 in 2015, funded 43 projects, an average of \$1980.<sup>2</sup> If we divided the total funding by the number of volunteer managed community museums the amount available to each museum would be \$280.

This program (as do most Government grant programs) fails to recognise or value the amount of work involved in making and acquitting a successful grant application. Our latest successful grant under the Volunteer Museum Grants Program was \$950. Often the time involved in making the application, completing the project and acquitting the grant is poorly rewarded in terms of payment per volunteer hour of effort.

The Port Macquarie Museum was one of seven museums to participate in a pilot grants program, Regional Museums Networking Grants, funded by Arts NSW and administered by Museums and Galleries NSW in 2013. The resulting project 'Our Rivers Our History' won both a State IMAGinE Award in 2015 and a National Museums and Galleries Award (MAGNA) in 2016. Sadly this pilot grant program ran for only two years, with Arts NSW determining that museums should apply for future funding for similar larger scale projects under its Arts and Cultural Development Program (ACDP). ACDP project funding grants include creative performance and arts practise projects, that is, discretionary funding. Pitching museum exhibitions and long term collection management projects against creative art forms and projects suggests to us a complete disregard for the ongoing needs and obligations of community held cultural materials and sustainable cultural assets management. It also undervalues the significant contributions made by volunteers in collecting, managing and preserving cultural heritage collections across the State. Under the auspices of Museums Australia – Mid North Coast Chapter we have applied for funding under the ACDP Project funding program, our scorecard to date is 1 failure, and 1 currently under assessment. It should be understood that without professional support many community owned collections and volunteer managed museums lack the capacity nor have access to professional support to decipher and address the creative and performing arts jargon used in the ACDP grant application.

The Arts NSW- Arts and Cultural Development Program does also provide for Program funding, however to be eligible for that program, an organisation must have successfully

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<sup>2</sup> Museums and Galleries of NSW Annual Review 2015  
[http://mgnsww.org.au/media/uploads/files/annualreview\\_2015.pdf](http://mgnsww.org.au/media/uploads/files/annualreview_2015.pdf)

completed and acquitted 3 projects funded under the ACDP Project funding program. This is difficult to achieve if your attempts to gain project funding in the first place are not realised. There is also an Arts NSW expectation that projects and indeed program funding will have some level of Local Government support, this again excludes or makes it difficult for some of us to achieve, particularly where Councils do not wish to fund or resource community owned cultural collections and heritage infrastructure.

Many of our collections are housed and exhibited in Heritage listed buildings. The condition of these buildings presents challenges for collection management and appropriate building maintenance and upgrades including adequate fire services, security and public access. For example the Port Macquarie Museum does not have lift access to its second storeys, making parts of the museum inaccessible to visitors and also to the volunteers who care for the collection. In fact much of our collection storage is on the second level to maximise ground level exhibition space, this means our volunteers are constantly walking and moving collection items up and down stairs. Having to use stairs to move objects rather than lifts places the collection at risk of damage and our volunteers at risk of injury.

Our recent attempts to move forward on a Master Plan in order to redevelop our site have identified that we will need to fund a new building Conservation Management Plan to meet our obligations under the Heritage Act. All existing capital and building program grants expect shovel ready projects and do not provide funds to properly plan and document such projects. Most of those programs also expect a sizeable organisational contribution, mostly \$1 for \$1. The ACDP capital fund provides funding up to only \$60,000, an extremely small amount. At the present time there are limited pathways to capital investment for volunteer managed museums. Most of their fund raising efforts must go into the planning and approval processes to achieve a shovel ready project let alone build it.

Our museum has grown over the years due to the dedicated efforts of our past volunteers, but exhibition spaces are now inadequate for the type and scale of exhibitions we are capable of staging and that audiences now expect. Building extensions were constructed based on funds available without regard to future use and maintenance. Flexible exhibition spaces enable changing exhibitions and this is what audiences and cultural tourists now expect. An investment in well scoped site master plans would ensure value for money in future capital investment of both private and public monies. Storage facilities for museums are generally overlooked, however these are important. Changing exhibitions means placing some items on display and moving others to storage for a time. Well planned storage is essential for best practice collection management, it is not an optional extra.

### **Council amalgamation funding impacts**

The Port Macquarie Hastings Council has not been targeted for amalgamation, but it should be understood that Council's actions have impacted volunteer managed museums for a number of years.

On the lower Mid North Coast of NSW, from Macksville to Foster, there are no paid museum staff and no professional support for museums and their collections provided by Councils. A recent survey by Museum and Galleries NSW asked for information about the impact of Council amalgamations and our response was, no impact. However that is because they have not provided any support before amalgamation.

Volunteer managed museums are in most aspects the paupers of the NSW museum sector, yet, and what is mostly overlooked, is that they hold much of the State's important cultural materials. Some of us, including several on the Mid North Coast of NSW hold some of the Nation's important cultural materials.<sup>3</sup> This should not be a surprise given that Australia's white settlement started in New South Wales.

From 2003 to 2012 Port Macquarie-Hastings Council funded a support worker for volunteer managed museums in the LGA. The appointment followed Council's participation and support of the Museums and Galleries NSW - Museum Advisor Program. Much was achieved for museums and collections in the Port Macquarie Hastings LGA during that time, including two acclaimed thematic studies 'Timber Stories of the Hastings' and 'Her Story', which won a Museums and Galleries NSW IMAGInE award in 2008. Most importantly, participating in those projects and working with the Museum support worker has enabled the author and our museum to continue our acclaimed work in collection management, ensuring that our rich cultural materials and their stories are recorded and preserved for future generations. In recent years we have extended our support to other museums on the Mid North Coast as a gesture of collaboration. The real issue is what happens next, as the level of leadership and support we are providing, all of it voluntary and by volunteers, is not sustainable into the future. The only way forward is to have a paid professional assume this role, as they did previously.

When Port Macquarie Hastings Council made their Heritage and Museums Officer redundant it was on the basis that

*'... Council does not operate a museum and nor does it have control over the existing museums that are operated by volunteers; however the role that Council has played in providing assistance to volunteer museums is acknowledged. However, heritage and museum activities compete with other Council priorities for funding...'*<sup>4</sup>

The exercise was intended to save Council and in particular Council's new cultural facility, The Glasshouse, money in response to public outrage about the cost not only of building the facility but also staffing and maintaining it. Accordingly, in a short period of time Port Macquarie Hastings Council's leading model of best practice collaboration with volunteer managed museums and community owned collections was scrapped. One can cynically look back on what occurred, as Port Macquarie Hastings Council continuing to lead the way for other Councils and our larger State collecting institutions to also reduce their spend on arts and culture and particularly collection management with wide spread budget cuts and staff redundancies.

We wish to express our concern with any future funding or resourcing models that are completely Council and Local Government based. Given our experiences with Port Macquarie Hastings Council, we consider it naïve to assume that unmonitored funding programs for museums and collections will not be cannibalised to fund other programs and Council shortfalls into the future. We particularly like the Regional Arts Board funding and program delivery model currently operating in NSW. For example with Arts Mid North

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<sup>3</sup> Significance Assessments for Great Lakes Museum, Kempsey Museum and Port Macquarie Museum, conducted by Roslyn Russell and funded under the Community Heritage Grants Program

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Port Macquarie Hastings Council to Museums Australia Mid North Coast, 25 October 2012

Coast, all Councils make a financial contribution with activities managed by an independent Board of stakeholders. This model could work for a Regional based collections management officer. Such a person could also work out of some of the better resourced museums rather than being reliant on Councils to provide office space and resources. It should also be pointed out that there is a high level of distrust amongst many of us with our local Councils, particularly given our experiences over the past 10 years.

Perhaps there is an opportunity to develop funding models with Councils under service level agreements that ensure funds cannot be used for other purposes, therefore ensuring that the government's and stakeholder's interests are maintained. It is understood that this was once the case with the Powerhouse Museum's (PHM) Regional Services program, however even this has been eaten away to a now sub-standard program with a small 'user pays' service offering. Museums and their volunteers, such as the author of this submission, have received the benefits of what the PHM's regional services offered and have partnered with the PHM to assist other regional museums and volunteers. Such collaborating opportunities have now been lost.

For transparency, we declare that the Port Macquarie Museum does have its rates donated by Port Macquarie Hastings Council. This is an in-kind benefit and for 2016 amounted to \$10,779.80. Other museums who own their own buildings in the LGA receive similar benefits.

### **Regional Case Study**

In 2013, Museums Australia Mid North Coast was awarded one of two Regional Museum Networking Grants, a pilot program funded by Arts NSW and administered by Museums and Galleries NSW. The project was extremely beneficial and unique as it was conceived, managed and delivered by Volunteer Managed Museums. The project outcomes comprise an online exhibition and mobile device accessible river trails. The project has won awards at both a State and National level. A summary of the outcomes are provided here to demonstrate that decent funding programs, in this case the grant investment was \$43,942 ex GST, can provide substantial and sustainable benefits for Volunteer Managed Museums and can contribute to cultural tourism. The project was launched in April 2015 and the outcomes are enduring. 'Our Rivers Our History' continues to grow audiences for museums and collections on the Mid North Coast and to attract tourists to our region's rivers and places.



<http://www.oro.com.au/>



Waterways – Our Rivers Our History - Outcomes at a glance:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Number of meetings/workshops held	8
Number of objects documented through to significance statement	58
Number of museums participating	7
Number of volunteer participants	18
Number of volunteer hours contributed (estimated)	3000
Value of volunteer hours contributed @ \$20 per hour	\$60,000
Number of additional volunteer hours re project management	200
Value of additional volunteer hours re project management (\$20ph)	\$4,000
Number of web exhibitions produced	7
Number of brochures printed	20,000
Number of online river trails produced	4
Number of objects photographed	58
Number of object photographs taken	121
Number of unique web exhibition visitors – year 1	4200
Number of website visits – year 1	9375
Number of page views – year 1	46009
Number of project awards won	2

Project Observations can be summarised as:

- Professional Support - Understanding of collection documentation processes and significance assessment appears to be greatly enhanced by regular professional support and contact, including professional review and not just training. Collection documentation including Significance assessment can only be learnt by actually undertaking the processes and ongoing support and review helps to consolidate learning.
- Capacity and Time - The demands on museum volunteers involved in collection management and documentation are great. This aspect of museum work is usually left to only a few interested and capable people and there is little time available for collection research, documentation and significance assessment. Even with a local champion, most museum volunteers are not interested in looking to undertake this often time consuming and complex work, and are certainly not keen to do it without professional and ongoing support at a local level.
- Training - Training is an ongoing issue in all aspects of work at volunteer run museums. Training and skills development at volunteer run museums need to be on an ongoing cycle given the nature of volunteering and that volunteers come and go constantly. Training is and can only be effective if followed up with ongoing professional review and support. Meaningful training and support associated with planned project outcomes, as was the case with this project would seem to provide sound outcomes, greatest benefit and opportunities for sustainability.
- Professional Support Models - When Port Macquarie Hastings Council made the position of Heritage and Museums Officer redundant in November 2012 they removed the only professional museum curator accessible to volunteer managed museums on the lower Mid North Coast. The Waterways project is the second

successful significance project coordinated by Museums Australia – Mid North Coast chapter. The model was a simple one, embedding regional networking, collection research and significance training in projects with tangible and beneficial outcomes for all involved. We believe that larger grants to fund projects like this one provide an alternative way for networks of volunteer museums to access and work with museum, arts and cultural consultants, professional photographers, artists and designers to ensure the vitality and sustainability of our community run museums.

### **Opportunities to revitalise structure, reach and impact of museums**

The above case study demonstrates what can be achieved by volunteers using volunteer managed collections with some relatively small funding and professional support, to share cultural collections and important cultural stories. The Port Macquarie Museum has taken this even further by now using 'ehive', a commercial online cataloguing and collection management system to share its wider collection and its collection research and documentation. Many other community and volunteer managed museums are doing the same. In our case, we have also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Library's 'Trove' database to make our well researched collection records, including statements of significance, publicly accessible online.

We have been frustrated by the lack of leadership in NSW on the issue of online access to collections. In Victoria, 'Victorian Collections'<sup>5</sup> is providing the systems and supporting volunteer managed museums to share their collections. Victorian Collections supposedly came about following the loss of cultural materials and collections during the 2009 devastating Victorian bush fires. Surely we do not need to have a natural catastrophic disaster to recognise the value and meaning of our State's history and heritage collections.

We are seeking a government funding program that will provide paid trained collections officers working in every region to support volunteer managed collections and museums. Our region is well set up to run a trial with an already established network, committed volunteers with capacity to take on and support such a project as evidenced by 'Our Rivers Our History', no existing paid positions and little Council support or interest.

We are also seeking a targeted government funding program to improve museum facilities in heritage buildings with funding for conservation management plans right through to capital works. A targeted funding program based on well thought out and designed site master plans would assist volunteer managed museums to achieve a sustainable future including facilities that meet cultural tourism expectations and best practice collection management. Existing programs are aimed at stop gap measures with a focus on short term maintenance issues only.

In the case of Port Macquarie Museum we are currently working our way through the maze of barriers and bureaucracy in order to implement some of the many recommendations in our Cultural Tourism Plan and in particular to make our building function better as a museum. We are custodians and owners of one of the oldest surviving buildings in Port

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<sup>5</sup> <https://victoriancollections.net.au/>

Macquarie. Our building is on the State Heritage Register and it would not have survived without the careful custodianship of our organisation over the past 56 years. We are in urgent need of a major cultural infrastructure grant which would allow us to upgrade and expand our exhibition and storage spaces, develop a new visitor entry and add additional facilities that might help us to generate recurrent revenue. There needs to be viable and clear pathways for successful and well established organisations such as the Port Macquarie Museum (Port Macquarie Historical Society) to secure the level of capital grants and investment that will allow us to lift our performance, attract more visitors and ensure our sustainability.

## **Cultural Tourism**

The Port Macquarie Museum secured a NSW Heritage Office grant in 2013 to complete a Cultural Tourism Plan. The resulting plan *Turning the Invisible into the Visible* provides a pathway to growing audiences, securing a larger share of the tourist dollar, contributing to the NSW Visitor Economy 2020 targets and providing a sustainable funding stream for the Port Macquarie Museum to become more self-sufficient, particularly in respect of maintaining its heritage listed building.

The Plan was reported in 2014 and the Museum has already completed or commenced 80% of the Plan's recommendations. The recommendations included rebranding, a focus on marketing and promotion, including becoming more visible as a Cultural Tourism facility and wider community partnerships to address lack of resources and support. The Museum has experienced a 22% increase in visitation over the past year, increased revenue (albeit on a small base) and has recently won the North Coast Tourism Award for cultural tourism for the third consecutive year. We are also working in collaboration with Charles Sturt University on a design project and have recently signed a 10 year agreement with Forestry Corporation NSW involving a sizeable investment by them in our facility and in return we will serve as a signpost to local Forestry tourist attractions.

In many small towns across regional NSW the volunteer managed museum is the main cultural tourist attraction. A study of the economic benefits of our volunteer managed museums on the visitor economy is long overdue. Such a study could assist to inform Destination Management Plans across the State. Museums must also play their part in collecting appropriate data and analysis and an education and awareness campaign would be necessary.

We recently came across a publication titled *Cultural Tourism Making it Work – Planning and Marketing for Cultural Tourism*. The booklet by Museums Association of Australia (NSW) and Museums Studies Unit, University of Sydney records papers from a Seminar held in March 1991. One of the papers particularly caught our attention 'Beyond the Walls: Or the Museum with a View' by Kylie Winkworth. Amongst her closing remarks she states: *'...The current structure of museum funding may be said to culturally disenfranchise communities across the state, leaving moveable heritage in vulnerable condition, inequities in funding gives us a lopsided museum structure of privilege and poverty that fails to signpost attractions outside a narrow radius of the city centre. It short changes both communities and tourists... If we're serious about meeting the needs of cultural tourists then*

*we have to support museums that will allow communities to explore their history and identify and share this heritage with visitors. This model of a more decentralised and equitable museum culture makes sense in both economic and equity grounds...'*

Let us hope that this Inquiry has some tangible and positive outcomes and, that we are not writing the same comments yet again in 25 years time.