

Role of Memory of the World in improving preservation of and access to documentary heritage at a national level

Jan Lyall – Chair Australian Memory of the World Committee

Current situation – General

The status of the Memory of the World (MOW) Programme prevents it from dictating preservation and access policies or procedures for national documentary heritage.

However at a national level it can have considerable indirect influence through its national MOW Committees. These committees can:

- Participate in selected heritage activities and be advocates for the documentary heritage sector.
- Promote the various documents produced by the Programme over the past twenty years. Examples include *The Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage*, *Risks Associated with the Use of Recordable CDs and DVDs as Reliable Storage Media in Archival Collections - Strategies and Alternatives*, etc. A full list is available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/resources/other-memory-of-the-world-documents/#c216115>
- Develop training programs designed to raise awareness of MOW and to offer specific training in preservation and access.
- Offer advice and assistance in preservation and access matters to prospective nomination applicants.
- Advise custodians of material inscribed on national registers.
- Remove inscribed material from national registers if adequate preservation and access conditions are inadequate. In order for this to happen appropriate monitoring needs to be in place.

The Australian Experience

Background

The preservation of and access to documentary heritage held in institutions throughout the country is covered in a variety of ways. These are similar but not necessarily the same for

each of the States and Territories and the national institutions. Government documentary heritage is protected by Archives Acts (National and each State and Territory), material held by national institutions and state institutions is covered by various other legislation relating to those institutions, and documentary heritage of businesses and held in private hands and by non-state institutions is not protected by legislation. Separate Commonwealth legislation, namely the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* and the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Regulations 1987*, regulates the export of nationally significant documentary heritage materials.

This situation has two consequences.

- As a general rule most Australian significant documentary heritage is reasonably well preserved and is able to be accessed.
- The poorly resourced Memory of the World Committee has to be inventive in order to influence preservation and access policies and procedures.

Although the Australian Memory of the World Committee <http://www.amw.org.au/> has been in continuous operation since December 2000 and has held more than 80 meetings its influence on preservation and access has been indirect. Most of its efforts to date have concentrated in two areas:

- establishing its national register <http://www.amw.org.au/content/australian-register> which is now highly respected and
- building a profile within the Australian heritage sector.

This strategy has resulted in a situation where MOW is recognised as an authoritative voice for documentary heritage. The Committee is now focussing more specifically on preservation and access issues.

Current activity

- Bob Pymm, the committee member representing the education sector, is producing an online nomination form for the Australian register. This form is in its final stages of development and will be available in pilot form in July 2012. It will include audio and video links and will have specific preservation information. It will be able to be modified to suit other national, regional and international programs.
- The development of a model preservation plan has been proposed by Ian Cook, Deputy Chair of the AMW Committee. It is being developed and will be produced in pilot form by July 2012. Details are at Attachment 1.
- Providing training in association with events, meetings and conferences. For example, workshops are held in association with the ceremonies held when new inscriptions are announced. A workshop will be held at the International Council of Archives Conference in Brisbane in August 2012.

- When appropriate, the AMW Committee makes submissions detailing the concerns of the documentary heritage sector to government inquiries and reviews. For example it recently submitted responses to the *Australia in the Asian Century* Inquiry and to the review *Refreshing the National Research Priorities*. It is preparing a submission to the review of *Australian Heritage Strategy*.
- With grant money it will sponsor a prize in the 2013 National History Challenge <http://www.htansw.asn.au/national-history-challenge>, a research-based competition for school students from years 5 to 12. The topic will be related to MOW. This is seen as a means of raising awareness amongst school children to the importance of documentary heritage and the need to ensure its preservation and to provide appropriate access to it.

Although most of these activities do not have preservation and access as their prime goal it will be possible to bring out their importance in the survival of significant documentary heritage.

Conclusion

There is a general view that too much emphasis has been placed to date on establishing registers to the detriment of preservation and access. However, MOW is still young. It has been necessary for it to achieve status and credibility. The registers have been a means of achieving that goal. Many are now quite substantial and by promoting the registers and identifying their value in recording the memory of the world it will be possible to emphasise the need to preserve them and to enable access to them.

There is now and there will continue to be a need to identify significant material at risk. It should be easier to gain support for the care of such material once MOW is recognised as the prime advocate for documentary heritage.

Attachment 1

A strategy to support the development of conservation plans for items and collections on the Australian Memory of the World Register

There are currently 37 inscriptions on the Australian Memory of the World Register, five of these are on the International Register and one of the five is on the Asia/Pacific Regional Register as well. Each item represents a significant record in the story of Australia.

How are these items managed? What risks do they face? Will climate change pose special problems for their longevity? What systems are in place to flag significant threats and what mitigation plans have been put in place to minimize potential problems? How does the Memory of the World Program in Australia become aware of these issues and is it appropriate that it is privy to information on current and potential problems considering that some information will be highly sensitive? Does the AMW have a role facilitating best practice management of inscribed items?

It is not possible for the AMW Committee to answer such questions because the Committee does not possess adequate data about how specific items¹ are managed. There are also related issues regarding the attitudes of custodians about sharing management information with a third party and thus the role of the Committee in the preservation domain. In addition, the Memory of the World Program does not have a specific standard by which organisations can evaluate the adequacy of their efforts to manage items on the register and ask for advice if they think it is needed.

The starting place to examine these issues is to determine whether each item, on the register has a specific conservation management plan. Such plans document problems (extrinsic and intrinsic) as well as specific approaches and responses to them. While the importance of generic collections conservation strategies across collections is acknowledged as vital for holistic collection treatments², the Memory of the World Programme³ has a generic goal – to promote best practice management of inscribed items that are located on one or more registers.

At the international level the Programme needs to enthusiastically promote the strategic management of each inscribed item. The most effective starting point to ensure effective management is through the preparation of specific, item-based, conservation management plans. Once plans exist, remedial actions can be developed by organizations proactively and they can be reviewed on a regular basis in a similar way to corresponding documentation associated with places on the World Heritage List. This approach represents a cultural change in thinking about inscribed items on the registers as well as the technical skills and change in thinking needed to prepare conservation management plans.

While the concept of the conservation management plan is highly developed within the World Heritage arena and more broadly in the built heritage and natural environment sectors, it is less theorized and

¹ Here 'item' or 'items' are used in a generic sense meaning individual pieces, collections, multiple collections and ensembles.

² Used here in terms of risk management terminology and methodology.

³ 'Programme' is used to signify the International MOW programme and 'program' refers to the work of the AMW Committee.

practiced in the movable heritage domain and is especially foreign to many organisations in the documentary heritage sector. Without the presence of and access to systematic management plans for items on the registers, the Australian Memory of the World Program is in no position to assess the quality of management and the levels of risk associated with items on the registers and react to specific threats through promotion and strategy dialogue.

Furthermore, how can those responsible for inscribed items proactively pursue both preservation and sustainable access when there is no existing benchmark for preservation planning? Similarly, how can the Program respond to new global threats if there is no framework in place to evaluate capacity and resilience?

The main considerations or elements for framing a model conservation management plan for items on the registers need be developed, ideally, through interactive and participatory processes including workshops, seminars and the use of blogs and other social media. The use of social media may help fast-track such a program and reduce the number of face-to-face events necessary to achieve the development of a model and its promulgation across the sectors as well as reducing the resources needed for a broad campaign.

There is an opportunity for the Australia Memory of the World Committee to pursue this concept by developing a schedule of activities, initially over the next 12 months, to draft a model Conservation Management Plan for use by organisations with items on the Australian Register. The model could be developed and tested through participatory processes and trialled through the preparation of conservation management plans for a small sample of items.

The trialling of such a model in a pilot program would provide a practical opportunity to test and refine the framework for broad application across the Australian Memory of Program. As a second stage the project could be extended and promoted within the international and regional Memory of the World communities and at an appropriate time further developed into an international guide for wider access and application.

Recommendation:

That this concept proposal be supported in principle as part of the AMW's forward work plan for 2012 and that a small working team be established with the task of drafting an action list to promote and implement the ideas covered in the above. The end of July 2012 would be a suitable target date for the completion of this task after which could then be assessed by the Committee at e.g. its September meeting.

Ian Cook – Deputy Chair, Australian Memory of the World Committee - 22 February 2012