Ngai pirrku mankulankula

Ngai nari Kumatpi Marrutya

Ngai kangkanthi marni naa pudni

Irdi yarta

Hello, it's (? Mickey O'Brien) [0:00:10] here, ambassador for Kaurna people, and today we're in Kaurna country and I'm known as the impatient one. So -

Ngadlu wangkanthi

Naa marni naalitya

Marni naa pudni parrku pirrku Warra mankunthi

Kaurna yarta

So we can say hello to you, and we also welcome you to this podcast recorded on Kaurna country.

Q: **Welcome to the South Australian Museum podcast. I'm your host, Meg Lloyd, and I'll take you through the curious and complex collections of the South Australian museum. Previously we've looked at the active collecting, taking things into the museum, but how do you keep track of everything once it's in? The museum is the library of life, and the specimens like books on the shelves. I'm back in the science centre behind the museum, talking to the person who keeps track of all of the objects. Keith Maguire is the collections data manager and coordinator, and his office is back here in the building where most of the biological and earth sciences collections are housed. He has a shelf full of thick books about databases and software and also non-accession specimens, like a jar full of snails.**

P1:   It's worth mentioning that my job is inherently uninteresting when described, working with data is not an interesting thing. Okay.

Q: (? Bit slack). Maybe we'll start off with, would you like to introduce yourself?

P1:   Hi, I'm – see now you've made me [0:01:36] self-conscious. I'm Keith Maguire, I work at the South Australian Museum as the collections data manager and coordinator. I look after the collections data, and the collections. I manage the biological and mineralogical collections staff. So I – my expertise lies in managing the information about the objects, not the objects themselves. So I have very little actual interaction with the physical items. The collection staff look after the items, they receive them from whoever brings them in. They do the data-basing, they record what it is, they do the necessary pest treatment and any preventative work that needs to be done, and then when they've recorded what the item is they put that into the database, and I look after the database. I brought this as an example of things that we don't take into the collection. At home in my house I have a little fishpond out the back, and one day I noticed that it was getting overrun with snails, so I was like, "That is interesting." So I got a little net and I fished out some of the snails, and I put them in this, it's called a McCartney bottle, it's filled with alcohol, in which I've put some of the snails I took from my garden. On the label I wrote exactly where the fishpond is, so that if ever in future this turned out to be interesting snails, we could go back, and people could say they were found at this location, and then I brought them in. I asked one of our volunteers here, who is a particular expert in snails, and I asked him what they were, and he said they were extremely uninteresting snails that probably came from an aquarium somewhere, and are a pest. So that's an example of an item that sits on my shelf in my office, but is not of scientific interest, so it does not get included into the collections. I was very disappointed. I am not required to interact with the items very much at all. I do a lot, because it's fascinating and it would be foolish not to when you work in a building surrounded with hundreds of thousands of fascinating items, but it's not actually an integral part of my job. Right. So if we're talking in general, historically all of the items in the museum were stored on paper registers. So there are still around, the giant leather-bound registers that are maybe half a

metre in size, they're really big, and in those everyone writes a single line for each item. At a point in time we realised that databases were more practical for this type of thing, because registers are organised just by number. So the only way to search for a thing is to know kind of roughly where it is in the number sequence, or to flick through a giant book. Now we store all of our collection information in a giant database. Currently, I'm going to say there are – I know, because I checked yesterday, there's just over 600,000 biological specimens, including the other collections, the humanities and the earth sciences. On the database at the moment there's probably about 800,000 individual items. All of the museums throughout Australia who have biological collections all send their data into a central place, into an aggregator called the Atlas of Living Australia. So if you're interested in, again say all the ants from Ceduna, if you search in the Atlas of Living Australia, you will find all of the ants from all of the museums that were collected in Ceduna. However, that's relying on the work having been done to get the information off the little bit of paper under the individual ants. Not everything is in the database. It is laborious to transcribe specimen data into a database, and it basically goes on how big is the collection. The bigger the collection, the more likely it is to not be entirely databased. So with the smaller collections, such as say mammals, there's only a few tens of thousands of them, so over the 20 or 30 years that we've been data-basing things, that's enough time to get around that and get it pretty much all in there. Whereas with, say, terrestrial invertebrates, there's – I mean, we don't know for certain, but in the region of one and a half million.

Q: **Still in the science centre, I talk a walk with Dr Matt Shaw, collection manager for terrestrial invertebrates. His collections are comprised of a spirit room, i.e. where specimens are kept in jars full of liquid, and a dry room with hundreds of drawers of pinned insects. I will admit that while I don't like live spiders, I'm relatively okay with dead ones, although seeing 30 male spiders floating in a jar and then realising that there are multiple corridors of shelves of similar jars was certainly an experience.**

P2:   I'm Matt Shaw, I'm collection manager of terrestrial invertebrates at the South Australian Museum. I look after the six-legged and eight-legged creatures here, with particular responsibility for the eight-legged ones, the arachnids, which include spiders and mites, but also other types of many legged creates. Most of them are pickled, I'm here to protect them, make sure they don't dry up or rot, to build the collection, make it relevant for the future and to interpret it to the public, and a big part of our job is documenting it because only the smaller proportion of what we hold and care for has actually been listed on a database. For arachnids, it's about 50,000 specimens, but there's several hundred thousand specimens here. So it's difficult sometimes to answer the question, "What do you hold?" We try and prioritise that and try and anticipate what people actually will want to research or know about. People's choice of what they get interested in can be somewhat arbitrary. Why would you pick any group of animals? What makes a group of animals interesting? The prejudice against small things doesn't make sense in biology, because size is no guarantee of their biological importance or ecological importance, in fact it's quite the opposite sometimes. Small things actually can be very important. I think their relationships are interesting. The ecological relationships, the superficial appearance once you start studying things is less interesting. It's good to just really think about, well if you're interested in nature it's potentially all interesting and why wouldn't you be interested in any particular group of animals? I've just opened a drawer of cockroaches. So we have a large and historic collection of cockroaches, some very beautiful ones, particularly those collected by an early collector called Tepper, who was a pioneer in Australia in various insect groups related to cockroaches. The drawer I've opened is interesting because it's full of a very interesting endemic cockroach from the Nullarbor caves, so it's a true cave dweller. It lives in perpetual darkness. Being in South Australia, South Australia is a very important focus. Most collections, to be able to interpret their own collections, they need to have relatives from elsewhere, and all collections started off trying to emulate the British Museum

and being a world collection. So particularly the earlier collections are very international sometimes. The collection priorities have changed. So early on colonial period trying to be like the British Museum, the idea was to have an encyclopaedia of the world represented in specimens. So museums were cathedrals of science and the way you identified things was by having a very representative, synoptic collection, and a lot of prestige and importance was placed on having a broad collection. It became more important to focus locally, and the South Australian Museum had a particularly controversial period when local specimens were thrown out in the late Victorian period in an attempt to get in more international specimens, so that was – it's fairly controversial. From a modern perspective it's like, well we just want them back, it would be fantastic to have them back, but the standards were different then.

P1:   We talk about different types of collections in completely different ways, but it's still useful to store them in a single database. So the information that you'd record about a biological specimen is obviously completely different to the information you would record about a historical boomerang. The different disciplines we record in different ways. Biological and mineralogical specimens, what's important is what it is, where it came from and when it was found. The outputs of human cultural practices have extra richness in the descriptions that doesn't really apply to items that weren't made by a person. So we include all of the cultural information that we know about the objects in the humanities collections, so kind of if it was created by a particular language group or by a particular person, we include that. As time goes on, we now defer more to the authority of the cultures from whom we have collected the outputs of their cultural practice. So rather than going with a description of a language group or a people that came from historical investigation, we now just ask people and take their word for it and go with the appropriate term that we're told to use, deferring to the obvious expertise of the person who has made the thing. That extra layer of interpretation of explanation, that only comes from having the people from that culture there with the item, whereas with the

biological and mineralogical collections, you will – there is an extra layer of historical context, but there isn't an extra layer of intentionality around it, where the item itself contains information.

Q: **Eleanor Adams is the digitisation officer for humanities. In non-COVID times she commands a team of around 40 volunteers to photograph every single one of the objects in the humanities collection.**

P3: Sure. So I'm Eleanor Adams, I've been working at the museum for, coming up for eight years now, and I am in the humanities collection digitisation manager. So we're dealing with material that has been made by people from all over Australia, and indeed all over the world. Day-to-day I manage a team of about 40 volunteers. They come into the museum and they help us document our objects in the humanities collections. They will come in, they will photograph the objects from a number of different angles, so we have a document of what the object looks like and what condition it's in. They will also measure those objects for us, so that we have a record of exactly the size of the object. If we're ever looking for a particular object that helps us find it, and then they will come in, they will process those images and then those images are then ready to be shared with the wider public and with communities. So the ultimate goal is to photograph every object in the collection. It is a big goal, it is hopefully an achievable goal, but museum collections continue to grow, and we continue to acquire things, so it's an ever-moving target to get through it all, but what we would like to have is a digital record for every object so we know what it looks like, and anyone can access our collections anytime, anywhere. For us at the moment, yeah, my role is focused in fact specifically on the Australian Aboriginal material culture collection. Yeah, so the process actually starts with me identifying the sort of priorities for the day. I'll bring the object out of the storage area, into our photography area. The volunteers will take that object, and for every object we try and document all the aspects. So if you're working on something like a container, you will take a photograph from directly

overhead, it will take a photograph of the underneath, it will take a photograph of all four sides.

Q: **Eleanor is set up at the offsite storage facility. It looks like a little stage for the objects. A trestle table is pressed against a wall, and a large white paper sheet hangs from the wall on to the table to create a neutral backdrop. Cameras are set up on tripods, and the measuring equipment is laid out, colour swatches, like the old TV test cards with the rainbow and shades of grey, and a ruler. All of this to ensure that each object gets approximately the same treatment and can be photographed and then the information about the object collated and added to the database.**

P3: And they're also documenting anything that's been recorded or written directly on to the object, because sometimes there's information that people have written on to the object that isn't reflected in our database or in our paper records. So we capture that with an image too, so that at some point in the future we can get on with transcribing that and making that findable as well. Once the photography has been complete, the object is measured, and then that goes back into our storage facility, and then the image is taken, and we make sure that the file name reflects the object information so that we can find it. We apply metadata to the image, so that's data about the image, who took the photograph, what is it a photograph of. We add our copyright information and all those sorts of bits of information onto the image. So that always goes with the image, and then we use Photoshop to just crop in, so we've got a nice close image, of the object. We add a scale bar, we add the registration number again so we can always track that image, and the object that it is of, and then that image gets attached to our database. So that's the end of the digitisation and photography process. Every time I open a drawer I get a new favourite object. It's – there is probably no one in this world who has seen every single item that is in that collection, I would think, because there is so much, and we often see the things that are requested for exhibition or are being requested for research,

and there are some things that don't get looked at very frequently. So when I'm going there for digitisation and we're opening drawers to find objects that are ready to come through, and sometimes you're picking up things people haven't seen for a hundred years, and you look at the detail or you look at the craftsmanship or you look at the skill, and all of that it just blows my mind every day. So almost daily my favourite object changes. That is the beauty of my job, is that I have the best excuse in the world to open up every single drawer in that room and look at every object in each drawer, so that we can document it. Really digitisation is always going to be an ongoing process, absolutely. It's like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge, you get to one end and you go back to the other, yeah. I don't know if this is a fun story, but certainly a highlight of me working here was getting to photograph Kondoli, the giant woven whale that has been hanging in the foyer of the museum, and is now hanging in our Aboriginal culture gallery. When that very first arrived it was – it came off the back of a truck and we needed images for all of our promotion material, and it was in our big store, laying in between sort of two columns of shelving, and they asked me to take a photograph of it. So I was in there with my camera and my giant ladder, working in between all this shelving and this amazing object, trying to a good few images of it. So I think that's my current highlight story.

Q: **Kondoli, the Keeper of the Fire, was a large woven southern right whale, made by artists Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, Bruce Trevorrow, Jelina Haines, Bessie Rigney and Luke Trevorrow, that currently hangs in the Australian Aboriginal Cultures gallery in the museum, above the canoes as you walk in on the ground floor. Ngarrindjeri country is south of Adelaide by the water, and the weaving style is instantly recognisable once you're family with it. Pale brown rushes, woven in tiny stitches to form the sculpture. Kondoli is formed of close-knit stitches for the body and more lace-like forms for the mouth and fins, and has an iridescent shell, the size of a child's palm, for an eye. I can see why Eleanor loves it, it is large and peaceful, impressive in the display of technical skill required to make it. The way it hangs in the gallery**

makes it look as though it is mid-swim through the air. The commissioning and creating of the piece is also a testament to efforts made to heal the relationship between Ngarrindjeri people and the museum. It must have been no small feat to photograph it. At over four metres long it definitely wouldn't fit on the trestle table. Eleanor and her team are constantly problem solving and devising new ways to digitise the collection, both the old objects and newly acquired ones. The way that the museum has stored things historically is changing, but we still have this metadata about the museum in the form of the archives. The archives are a corporate memory of the museum as an institution. Here in this library are the various records of the acquisitions, the history of the institution and the original collection registers. There's also a rare book room. Because of the way that the objects have been collected over the years, the archives is the home of the family history unit, which helps connects Aboriginal people with genealogical records. I spoke with Lea Gardam, collection manager for the archives. A sign behind her desk, a 1910 artefact from the archives, reads, "Public library, museum and art gallery of South Australia. Visitors are requested not to spit in this building, and are reminded that under the regulations persons so offending render themselves liable to a penalty not exceeding £20".

P4:   Hi, my name is Lea Gardam, I'm a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman from the North West coast of Tassie. I finished school in '96, my best friend moved down to Adelaide, and I thought, oh, why not, take a chance. I moved down here and throughout my schooling I hadn't – I think I'd probably been to a museum once, or maybe twice. So we lived in the country in Tassie until I was 10, and we didn't – like long – going to Hobart was a – I think we did it once, and then I applied for a traineeship with the South Australian Museum, with the Aboriginal Family History Unit, and started off there. So the purpose of the collection – the purpose of a public collection, so that's a big challenge that we have, is making the collections visible on the – on an online platform, so people are aware of what's held here. So our archive holds a lot of material. We have

paintings, manuscripts, photographs, film, glass plates, and maps. So without the archive a lot of the other collections within the museum, not nil and void sort of thing, but you need the documentation for that object. So without that information that's stored in the archive, the history, the how did it come to the museum, that actual object, not that it's nothing, but it needs that information to go with it. Like who collected it, what year. So that's all recorded and stored within the archive within the registers, within the correspondence. So within the archives there's a lot of material that is sensitive. So we need to be careful in what people view within the archives. There is a lot of culturally sensitive material. There's men's business, there's women's business, so we have worked with communities throughout the years in different genders coming and going through the materials, separating it from what people can and can't access. So that's a really tricky part of our job, is just the safety, the cultural safety, of whether it be the staff, the people who are accessing it, and the cultural – the language group, the people who that material is recorded about. So what's changed from many years ago is this day and age is that the ownership is with the community, or the families. So with images we bring that back to the families. So within the archives we have family history staff. They help people who are researching their family trees, part of – people who were taken, part of the stolen generation. We have a lot of genealogies recorded from the '20s through to the '60s, recorded at different missions, reserves, throughout Australia. The genealogies were recorded through, or by Norman Barnett Tindale and Joseph Birdsell. Two of the bigger sort of expeditions was the Harvard-Adelaide expedition in 1938-39, where they went throughout Australia and recorded genealogies, sound recordings, film, language material, and part of that were genealogies and sociological, anthropological data.

Q: **Norman Tindale was an entomologist and anthropologist of the South Australian Museum. He worked here from 1919 to 1968, and his work in that time includes some of the most comprehensive surveys of Aboriginal reserves and missions every recorded. His team began mapping the various**

language groups around the continent. Because of those surveys, the South Australian Museum holds lots of information about Aboriginal families who lived in reserves and missions. Tindale collected data cards which give many details about people, their family connections and their physical attributes. Tindale also collected drawings by Aboriginal people, most of them on large brown craft paper, which for some of the visitors to the archives are the most touching items. People make contact with the family history team wanting to know about where they came from, and if the items are in the collection, they may be able to hold something that their grandparents created.

P4:   Once a lady came in and she was looking at the anthropological card and she thought, oh, and she wondered why her grandson was so tall, and she never knew her father, whereas on the data card her father was six foot, was quite tall, and it sort of – she went, "Oh, wow, this is obviously where my grandson gets his height from." So what we think mightn't be that – we sort of think how was – the information was recorded, but it does help a lot of people. So I've always loved my job, I love what we do here, but sometimes we have to – we ended up having to put a clock into the actual archive because we'd be in there, and you're in there to look for something or find something, and then the next thing you know it's four hours later, because you're constantly finding more and more things and you get a little bit side-tracked. So we ended up putting a clock in there because I'd be like, "Gee, I'm hungry" and yeah, that's why because it's four hours later. Yeah.

P1:   So the database itself will never be finished. There is essentially an infinite amount of information you can say about anything. To choose an example at random, that I have on my desk in front of me, I've got a skull here of a platypus. You can start off by describing the two pieces of the skull in great detail, before you even get on to the circumstances of its collection. So I know it was collected in 1975 near Renmark, but then I could go in and describe what the weather was like at the time it was collected. I could describe the climate of the area,

just to give a bit more context to the specimen. I could then describe what's missing from the specimen. The one I have in front of me is just a skull and jaw. Where is the rest of the skeleton? What happened to the rest of the skeleton? I can describe that, which is absences, and obviously once you get into recording absences then the amount of information that we definitely don't know about things is enormous, if not infinite.

Q: **How do you describe the collections? How would you find what you needed, if what you needed was one bee in one drawer in a collection of literally thousands of bees in drawers? How do you store someone's childhood drawings, so that one day their grandchild might reconnect with them, whilst still protecting everyone's privacy and practice in cultural care? There are no easy answers, but I know there is a building full of people right here in Adelaide working on the challenge. Thank you for listening to the South Australian Museum podcast. Hosted by me, Meg Lloyd, and recorded on Kaurna country. Original theme music by Peter Saunders, audio production by (? Jay Hobbs) [00:29:12]. This podcast has been made possible by the support of National Science week. See our website www.scienceweek.net.au, for amazing science events happening all over Australia. Thank you to all the SAM staff for trusting me to record their stories. For more information about our museum, please visit our website www.samuseum.sa.gov.au, or get in touch by emailing programs@samuseum.sa.gov.au. Ngaityalya Nakutha. Thank you. See you later.**

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