

6 June 2014

Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements  
Productivity Commission  
LB2 Collins Street East  
Melbourne  
VIC 8003  
[disaster.funding@pc.gov.au](mailto:disaster.funding@pc.gov.au)

Dear Sirs

We are writing to express our disappointment and concern that in the Productivity Commission's major review of Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements, citing mitigation, resilience and recovery for communities, there should be no mention of our national cultural heritage.

As the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross, Blue Shield Australia is acutely aware of the threat to galleries, libraries, archives, monuments and museums at times of natural disaster.

The flooding of Brisbane's cultural centre, including Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Queensland Museum South Bank, Queensland Art Gallery, State Library of Queensland, The Edge Digital Cultural Centre and the Gallery of Modern Art in 2011; the loss of the Marysville historical society collection in the Victorian Bushfires of 2009; the severe flooding of Coffs Harbour Museum in New South Wales, not once, but twice, in 1996 and 2009; the extensive damage to the Innisfail War Memorial during Cyclone Larry in 2006; the destruction caused by the Newcastle earthquake on the University's Auchmuty Library in 1989; these are just a few examples of how unique collections around Australia have been damaged and destroyed over the last 25 years.

Of course, we are concerned about the items themselves and the loss of often-irreplaceable artefacts; but we are also mindful of the traumatic effect on individuals, families and communities of losing precious items that contribute to shared memories, a strong sense of identity, of place, and of belonging.

Much is made of the need to invest in mitigating the risk to infrastructure. While we don't underestimate the usefulness of roads and utilities, we would like to draw the Productivity Commission's attention to our cultural heritage as equally deserving of its attention.

It is the responsibility of federal, state, territory and local governments to insure the collections of their own institutions, but there are activities that require the Australian Government to set the agenda and provide a proportion of funding to underpin a national approach.

Blue Shield Australia advocates for the Federal Government to:

- Fund the establishment and operation of local, state, territory and national disaster networks, which help individuals, families, volunteer-run historical societies and small museums mitigate the risks of disasters to heritage collections in their community.
- Fund awareness-raising and capacity building initiatives for volunteers and professionals working in cultural heritage sector with members of the emergency services who provide the first line of response to natural or man made disasters.

Funding these two programs would go a long way to addressing the loss of Australia's cultural heritage through flood, fire and other forms of natural or man made devastation. Blue Shield Australia sincerely requests that the Productivity Commission consider cultural heritage within this review of Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements and hopes that the enquiry will recommend to the Australian Government the funding of these two programs as a priority.

Blue Shield Australia would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission further.

Yours faithfully

Detlev Lueth  
Chair, Blue Shield Australia  
[info@blueshieldaustralia.org.au](mailto:info@blueshieldaustralia.org.au)

## 1. ABOUT BLUE SHIELD AUSTRALIA

The Blue Shield is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. The name Blue Shield comes from the UNESCO 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which specifies a blue shield as the symbol for marking protected cultural property.

Blue Shield is also the name of an international committee set up in 1996 to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by disasters of all types. The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) and its affiliated national committees (such as Blue Shield Australia) work together as the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross internationally.

Blue Shield Australia is one of many national committees organised under the mission and objectives of the ICBS. BSA was established in 2005 with the approval and support of ICBS, as a federation of four non-governmental organisations (or 'pillars'), which represent professionals active in the fields of archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums.

The BSA committee comprises representatives from the following Australian peak industry organisations:

- ICA: the International Council on Archives, represented in Australia by the *Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities*
- ICOM: the International Council of Museums, represented in Australia by *ICOM Australia*
- ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites, represented in Australia by *Australia ICOMOS*
- IFLA: the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, represented in Australia by the *Australian Library and Information Association*

These four organisations work together to prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergency situations in case of armed conflict or natural disasters that could affect Australia's cultural heritage.

BSA aims to raise awareness of the value of Australian cultural heritage and the need for its protection against threats of all kinds. In order to achieve this aim, BSA organises an annual national campaign - May Day - which urges cultural heritage organisations around Australia to focus on disaster preparedness and response.

## 2. SUMMARY OF THE ISSUES

Significant cultural materials are often lost in natural or man-made disasters. These may be in public collections, but often they are in private collections.

Private collections may not be insured and owners are often unaware of how to reduce risk of damage or loss of their collections in a disaster. It is worth noting that roughly 60% of public collections have come from private collections.

Long term planning would enable institutions and individuals to make contingency plans and take precautions well in advance of known periods of seasonal disasters: bushfires, cyclones and floods, rather than making last minute decisions which put valuables and heritage items at risk.

Regional and community disaster networks play a significant role in promoting disaster preparedness. As ongoing relationships develop, they offer strong support networks with local knowledge that enhance the work performed by emergency services and government bodies. Having the support of known colleagues in difficult times who understand the particularities of a historical building or a collection can provide assistance that is sensitive to the specific vulnerabilities of our heritage.

Such cultural heritage disaster preparedness networks raise awareness of the types of damage that disasters can cause to our heritage, how things can be stored safely or moved and what can be done after a disaster to mitigate damage. These actions help protect and recover our cultural heritage, which in turn helps to rebuild communities and make them more resilient.

## 3. DISASTER PLANNING & CULTURAL HERITAGE

Generally, national and state collecting and archiving institutions have established disaster plans that focus on minimising the impact of disasters, both man-made and natural, on their collections. Some provide outreach to smaller and regional institutions and organisations, offering training and workshops on disaster preparedness. However such support can vary greatly between institutions and may be reliant on the interest and motivation of individual employees rather than being a given.

Establishing and funding programs to ensure groups and individuals understand what is required in planning for a disaster would improve outcomes. Naturally, saving lives is the most important aim but the protection of cultural heritage is also extremely important. Cultural heritage items and places provide symbols and history that define communities, shape identity and in times of disaster provide material and intangible connections to the past that are important to a community's resilience.

After a disaster, communities and organisations are better aware of what can go wrong and have a heightened awareness of the need to be prepared for a disaster. While government funded organisations are likely to have a disaster plan, smaller organisations with limited funding and private individuals need more resources to prepare for the types of disaster that they are vulnerable to. Appropriate preparation can assist communities and collections to reduce the impact of disasters and thereby reduce the cost of recovery, rebuilding, and the loss of our unique non-renewable cultural heritage – whether it is a family heirloom, a significant artwork, or a historical building.

## 4. EXAMPLES

### 4.1 Queensland Floods 2011

- By the end of 2010, a number of disaster preparedness and risk management workshops had been held in many parts of Queensland. Attendees at these workshops came from schools, libraries, museums, archives and historical societies. As well, in December 2010, Q-DIS, an online network focused on disaster preparedness, management and salvage was launched. Q-DIS was an excellent channel for communications regarding the floods and the impact on collections across the state. It was deemed that the training workshops in 2010 played an important role in raising awareness of how to prepare for a disaster and meant that numerous plans had been devised before the disaster thereby mitigating the effects of the floods. Q-DIS is accessible through Museums Australia's MA Nexus.
- Blue Shield Australia (BSA) promoted the Q-DIS Network through its website and provided information about flood activity and damage in NSW and Victoria. Members of the BSA committee provided support through their institutions (PROV and Museum Victoria) by printing and delivering AICCM's *After A Flood* brochures to be distributed in affected areas in QLD, NSW, and VIC.
- Although the 2011 floods didn't do as much damage as they could have to certain collections, nonetheless, there was widespread damage to numerous communities with massive clean up required. The Museum and Gallery Services Queensland had its Donation Account endorsed as a deductible gift recipient to raise funds to support the recovery of Queensland's movable cultural collections impacted by Tropical Cyclone Yasi. Donations to the fund assisted the Gayndah and District Historical Society in its flood recovery.

### 4.2 Victorian Bushfires 2009

- Many lessons have been learned about the necessity of being prepared for disaster through the terrible experience of the 2009 bushfires in Victoria. Significant loss of life, property, livestock, native fauna and flora, homes and communities caused trauma on an incredible scale. There was also significant loss of cultural collections and heritage but in most cases other than the Marysville Historical Society they were in private collections and may not have been insured. Nonetheless even if they had been insured, a unique artwork, family heirloom, historic building or monument or other forms of cultural heritage once lost can never be replaced.
- Much of the cultural heritage lost in these fires was not catalogued or listed on historical registers. There is only anecdotal evidence of some things that have been lost. One woman at St Andrew's lost her home and 40 paintings by important Australian artists she had inherited from her grandfather. They were uninsured. This is just one person's account of the cultural heritage she lost. Due to the severity of the damage and loss of life of the bushfires, personal and community welfare has naturally been the main focus of recovery and renewal. Accordingly, our full understanding of what has been lost in terms of cultural material will never be known.

- BSA, its individual members and the State collecting and archiving institutions supported outreach to bushfire affected communities. Brochures and posters alerted people that damaged items that were recognisable might be conserved in some way so that people could make informed decisions about throwing possessions away or keeping them. The Victorian institutions and the NAA offered storage materials for salvaged materials that were distributed by AICCM volunteers at community meetings. In a number of cases it was because of these combined efforts that people who lost almost everything were able to salvage certain damaged items and have them conserved. In one case a young man who lost his parents and little brother only has a few household items that miraculously have specific ties to each family member. A social worker liaised with an AICCM conservator, then raised funds to have these items cleaned and stabilised by a conservator so that he would have something tangible with which to remember his family.

## 5. NATURAL DISASTER FUNDING ISSUES FOR AUSTRALIA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

1. Blue Shield Australia sees the need for the Australian Government to play a stronger leadership role in funding preparedness for natural disasters, to help protect our nation's cultural heritage in both public and private collections.
2. While the federal government has limited oversight of galleries, libraries, archives, monuments and museums - much of the responsibility lying with state, territory and local government - there is a critical need for specific disaster preparedness for Australia's cultural heritage to be included on the national agenda. Disaster preparedness for the cultural takes many forms, including, awareness raising, cross-sector collaboration and capacity building.
3. Blue Shield Australia proposes that the following items be considered as part of this inquiry:
  - Funding the establishment and operation of local, state, territory and national disaster networks, which help individuals, families, volunteer-run historical societies and small museums mitigate the risks of disasters to heritage collections in their community.
  - Funding awareness-raising and capacity building initiatives for volunteers and professionals working in cultural heritage sector with members of the emergency services who often provide the first line of response to natural disasters.