



Tjanpi Desert Weavers from the *Songlines: Seven Sisters* exhibit at the NMA (2015), photograph: Vicki Bosisto

## Increasing Indigenous Community Engagement within Museums

### Executive Summary

In the past, museums have been seen as “imperialistic institution[s] which misrepresent [Indigenous] culture” (Conaty, 2003: 231). In modern day more and more museums are attempting to change this historical perception and instead position themselves as partners in presenting Indigenous communities’ histories and cultures.

To fully shift into the role of being a partner to Indigenous communities, museums must have a comprehensive understanding of the historical and modern socio-political barriers that deter Indigenous communities from engaging with museums. These barriers will vary with different Indigenous communities and should be addressed in cooperation with said communities.

Achieving successful cooperation with Indigenous communities functions on a basis of mutual trust and dedication to long-term partnership. Museums are responsible for educating themselves and their staff regarding Indigenous rights, struggles, and history prior to reaching out to Indigenous communities in hopes of collaboration. Doing this helps to create a safe and respectful environment for Indigenous peoples to work in without putting the full burden of Indigenous education on them (Conaty, 2008; Janke, 2018).

This brief will provide recommendations of direct action that museums can implement. These recommendations can be utilized by institutions who are at the beginning of their journey into Indigenous community engagement as well as institutions who are well seasoned in Indigenous engagement.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide cultural competency and safety training for all members of staff to help shift the museum’s internal culture.
- Implement a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to help museums determine what steps they need to take to equalize their institution for Indigenous peoples on a long-term basis.
- Create employment positions in the museum specifically for Indigenous peoples to ensure that Indigenous peoples have staff members who can relate to their experiences and concerns.
- Give control over Indigenous exhibition creation to Indigenous peoples allowing them to determine how their histories are told.

## Introduction

Ethnic and racial equality has become a central concern for many institutions in recent years, which is likely due to the international Black Lives Matter protests (Yeaman and Greenwood, 2022). Indigenous communities and peoples face unique challenges in the fight for their racial and cultural equality. In 2007 the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which addresses the struggles and rights that are distinctive to Indigenous populations.

This study aims to explore the ways in which museums can help to mitigate and/or lessen some of the struggles faced by Indigenous peoples by making museums themselves centers of Indigenous engagement and activism. Museums often already possess Indigenous artifacts and/or human remains, giving them a responsibility to initiate engagement with the Indigenous communities their collections relate to.

conducted entirely through secondary literature-based data. This secondary data included not only reading the works of top researchers, academics, and practitioners in the field of Indigenous museum engagement, but also focused specifically on three museums that are internationally renowned for their work with Indigenous communities.

These three museums are the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington D.C., the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, and the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, Australia.

These three institutions were evaluated in three different categories:

1. **The political relationship between Indigenous communities and museums**, which evaluated any existing governmental legislation regarding repatriation and Indigenous rights, each museum's existing museum policies, and the historical relationship between Indigenous communities and each museum.
2. **The physical relationship between Indigenous communities, museums, and land**, which examined proximity's effect on repatriation, sustaining relationships between the museum and Indigenous communities, and the museums' proximity to traditional Indigenous land.
3. **The museums' internal cultures**, which explored factors such as positions created for Indigenous peoples and programs created to benefit Indigenous communities.

These three factors assisted in narrowing down the identification process of replicable traits that result in successful Indigenous engagement.



*Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations at the NMAI, photograph: Margaret McColl*

## Overview of the problem/Methodology

To discover what strategies already used by museums today most reliably result in successful engagement with Indigenous communities this research was



*Inner foyer at the NMAI, photograph: Margaret McColl*



## Key Results and Findings

### *Theme 1: Respect, Trust, and Open Communication between Indigenous Communities and the Museum*

The successful programs and initiatives at the Glenbow, the NMAI, and the NMA emphasize building a strong foundation of mutual respect, trust, and open communication (Conaty, 2003; Rosoff, 2003; Janke, 2018, Pickering, 2020).

Establishing respect, trust, and open communication from the very first interaction between a museum and an Indigenous community helps both groups to determine what each want and/or need from the relationship and provide a strong basis for how to go about fulfilling those wants and/or needs.

Focusing on the crucial element of open communication gives both museums and Indigenous communities the space and time to prepare for “unfamiliarity with cultural protocols – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous”, as well as any language barriers (Pickering, 2020: 80).

Keeping in mind each groups wants, needs, and any necessary accommodations they might benefit from enables both the museum and Indigenous communities to have realistic expectations about their relationship (Janke, 2018).

### *Theme 2: ‘Indigenizing’ the Museum*

Museums and Indigenous communities have vastly different perspectives regarding the appropriate treatment of objects and the purpose of museums themselves (Clavir, 2002). Instead of trying to change this Ng *et al.* suggest ‘indigenizing’ the museum, which centers and prioritizes “Indigenous peoples, perspectives, and ways of knowing” (Ng *et al.*, 2022: 18).

Indigenizing the museum recognizes that Indigenous peoples have a right to decide how their histories are told, and what elements of those histories are publicized or kept private (Ames, 2003).

This represents a shift in curatorial authority away from the museum and sets a precedent of change in modern museum work. Indigenizing the museum shows that museums no longer symbolize “the dominant culture imposing its own values, judgements and definitions over the self-identity” of Indigenous communities.

Instead, many museums today are dedicated to ‘truth-telling’ efforts that embolden the voices of marginalized communities in dominant spheres (Janke, 2018).



Tipi at the Blackfoot Indians: Nisitapisinni: Our Way of Life exhibition, photograph: Daderot

### *Theme 3: Institutional Culture Shifts*

Museums have been “historically difficult spaces for Indigenous people to work” due to the general reduction of Indigenous culture, practices, and beliefs from a legitimate way of life in modern day to a historicized thing of the past (Janke, 2018: 20). Much of this can be changed through a shift in a museum’s internal community culture.

An institution's internal culture has been cited as one of the most important factors contributing to either the success or failure of a museum’s community outreach initiatives (Peers and Brown, 2003; Ames, 2003; Conaty, 2008). An institution’s internal culture is affected by every member of staff, across all aspects of museum work.

Therefore, when considering how to shift an institutional internal culture, all members of staff must be taken into consideration and included in the process.

**Theme 4: Creating Opportunities for Indigenous Peoples in the Museum**

Institutions must commit themselves to creating opportunities for Indigenous peoples to work, learn, teach, and advise while being fairly compensated (Janke, 2018).

This must not only include prioritizing the employment of Indigenous peoples in roles such as curators and museum education specialists, but must also entail the creation of positions to be filled specifically by Indigenous peoples.

Developing positions for Indigenous peoples in the museum shows an institutional commitment to long-term, equal partnership between the museum and Indigenous peoples.

The limitations of this research are that, due to time constraints and the global lens of the study, no primary data was collected. Given more time and resources this study would have included interviews with both Indigenous community members and museum professionals from the Glenbow museum, the NMA, and the NMAI about their experiences collaborating with one another. Additionally, this study would have been able to visit these three museums in person to interrogate the engagement work being done more deeply.

## Implications and Recommendations

While this study focused on the Glenbow Museum, the NMAI, and the NMA, it has important implications for all museums seeking to increase and/or improve their engagement with Indigenous communities. The recommendations presented below can be applied to any interested museums.

Based on the efficacy of existing Indigenous engagement initiatives at the Glenbow museum, the NMAI, and the NMA, the **key recommendations** for increasing Indigenous engagement in museums is as follows:

1. **Cultural competency and safety training** must be provided to *all* members of staff in a museum. Teaching staff how to be sensitive and respectful of others' beliefs, cultures, and practices creates a safer and more comfortable environment for Indigenous peoples to work and share their heritage in (Janke, 2018).
2. **Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)** "allow organisations to continuously develop their reconciliation commitments" to Indigenous communities (Reconciliation Australia, online). Museums interested in making their institution equitable for all must take into consideration how the five dimensions of reconciliation – race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity, unity, and historical acceptance – effect their work in collections management, exhibition curation, community engagement, and visitor experience.
3. **Creating positions for Indigenous peoples** ensures that Indigenous voices are being heard in the museum and that Indigenous individuals are being encouraged to fill positions of power. This may entail prioritizing Indigenous applicants or developing positions specifically for Indigenous peoples. Such positions might be sitting on an Indigenous elder or youth board, being on an Indigenous liaison or advisory council, paid internships, or procuring Indigenous goods (such as Indigenous artwork)



"We are no longer imperialistic institutions which misrepresent [Indigenous] culture.

We have become partners in presenting their story, in their words, so that it can be explained and preserved."

directly from Indigenous businesses (Conaty, 2003; Janke, 2018).

4. **Giving Indigenous peoples curatorial authority over Indigenous exhibits** gives them back the right to determine how their stories are told to the public (Ames, 2003; Conaty, 2003). For many Indigenous communities aspects of Indigenous knowledge are sacred and are not meant to be known by non-Indigenous peoples. Allowing Indigenous peoples to have full curatorial authority of Indigenous exhibits enables them to authentically share aspects of their history, culture, beliefs, and knowledge while still giving them the power to protect private sacred knowledge (Clavir, 2002).

Implementing these recommendations will not only benefit Indigenous peoples and communities, but will make the museum a safer, more comfortable, and more equitable space for all marginalized groups. Equity for one improves equity for all.

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## Acknowledgements & Contact details

Great thanks and appreciation given to: Margaret McColl, Poppy Perrin, Julianne Stewart, Kiley Tucker, Kieren Mehta, Freddie Mehta-Sanborn, Risa Arbolino, and the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institute.

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