

# The Distributed National Collection in Wales – Conservation on the national agenda

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**ABSTRACT**

The concept of the Distributed National Collection is a Wales-wide collections management initiative that embeds conservation and access issues for collections across Welsh museums and was adopted by CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales (CyMAL) for the Welsh Government within the 2010 Museums Strategy. Collections and the stories they tell are the most fundamental of museum assets. In recent years, there have been a number of important initiatives to better document, understand and care for museum collections. Whilst this remains by no means a comprehensive achievement with much still to be done, there is now an opportunity to take stock and to develop the concept in practical ways. This paper provides a summary of the evolution and adoption of the concept and identifies, via case studies, the challenges embodied in enacting a genuinely national approach to collections management.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Welsh museum community is relatively small, with 90 organisations accredited as museums. It is a diverse group, serving the people of Wales, and the world, via museums with different funding models, collection type, governance and geographic spread. Welsh museum professionals have always sought to find areas of common interest and purpose around their collections. This has evolved into the concept of the *Distributed National Collection*. Although similar to initiatives in other countries, this model offers a distinctive approach that is broad and holistic, from conservation and documentation, to collecting and interpreting, and the evolution of bilingual terminology.

**THE DISTRIBUTED NATIONAL COLLECTION****Definition**

The Distributed National Collection (DNC) comprises objects, specimens and records that provide the evidence of the history, and tell the story, of Wales and its people. These collections are held across the nation by many organisations including museums, libraries and archives. Considered in those terms, the divisions of collecting institutions make little sense. Why should carved stone from a Cistercian monastery be cared for differently just because fragments are found in several organisations? Any attempt to care for these collections and make them accessible should be coordinated as part of a shared responsibility for our heritage. The DNC initiative aims to enable information to be discovered and shared, and omissions and overlaps identified.

**Development of the DNC Wales**

The concept of the DNC was first identified in Wales within the 2000 Libraries and Information Services Council for Wales (LISC Wales) report, *The Future of Our Recorded Past*, where the recommendation came from a conservation perspective: 'There is a need for a national strategy for Wales for the conservation and preservation of all collections that combine to form a national collection' (Henderson 2000).

A subsequent review of archaeological collections in 2003 reached a similar conclusion, stating there was 'an urgent need for a national, unified

approach to archaeological archives’ (Henderson and Parkes 2004). The recommendations in the report included the establishment of a panel to develop a formal collaborative relationship between organisations holding archaeological collections and to create a unified Welsh strategy for collecting archaeological material.

More recently, The Welsh Federation of Museums and Art Galleries (Welsh Museums Fed) advocated for the DNC during consultation with the Welsh Government on the development of a strategy for museums in Wales. The resultant Museums Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government 2010) notes that, ‘While each individual organisation holds part of the story of Wales, the sum of the parts delivers a comprehensive, if not complete, distributed national collection that paints the past and provides insights into the way our national collection has developed over time’.

Welsh Museums Fed has responsibility for developing the concept. Their website notes: ‘Institutions across Wales should coordinate the collection, display, research, storage and disposal of collections to ensure the greatest access to collections with efficient targeting of resources’ (2013).

#### DNC: International and UK

Libraries in Australia first developed and adopted the ultimately unsuccessful concept of the DNC during the 1980s (Genoni 2002), where it was mainly a framework for increased access to collections, based on the premise of building a national system of cooperative collecting.

The Delta Plan for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands was one of the first applications of a DNC concept in museums. It had the specific aim of clearing backlogs in cataloguing and conservation in 33 major institutions before 2000 (De Bruin 2004). The plan developed from earlier studies, which identified a conservation backlog of 70,000 work years. Grant funding was made available from government to improve facilities. From this, in 1992, the *Collectie Nederland* emerged (EGMUS 2012).

In 2005, Museums Aotearoa (2005) published *A Strategy for the Museum Sector in New Zealand*. This identified issues around recognition of nationally significant collections within different museums across New Zealand and the lack of a coordinated approach to the preservation of the nation’s collection as a whole. A major touring exhibition with smaller ‘satellite’ exhibitions was planned to bring together 200–400 objects and specimens in a ‘treasures’ exhibition. This approach had political and museum sector support. In 2010, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage in New Zealand established the Objects and Collections of National Importance (OCNI) project, which aimed to improve care of, access to and awareness of New Zealand’s cultural heritage (Houlihan 2013). There has been no formal definition by government on what constitutes the OCNI.

The Collections Council of Australia developed and administered *Significance 2.0* (Russell and Winkworth 2009), a self-assessment scheme identifying nationally significant objects or collections in Australia. Nominated objects were vetted by an expert panel. Funding has been discontinued, but *Significance 2.0* was referenced extensively in the development of the Welsh significance toolkit (Welsh Government 2013b).

In Canada, the Moveable Cultural Property Program was established in 1977 by statute (covered by the Cultural Property Export and Import Act). The scheme focusses on objects, collections and archives of national importance. It is administered by the Movable Cultural Property Directorate and the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (Government of Canada 2012).

In the UK, the concept was picked up by a task force involving the British Library and other major library services during the 1990s, when the creation of a coordinated approach to develop specialised subject-based research collections was mooted (Genoni 2002). For museums, the distributed national collection was identified in *Renaissance in the Regions*, a review of non-national museums in England (Re:source 2001). The concept relates mainly to object or subject specialist areas, for example, a study on agricultural collections carried out in England (Viner and Wilson 2004). The concept was picked up in Scotland, where the National Burns Collection partnership addresses issues on improving conservation and documentation of items related to the Scottish poet in different collections distributed across the country. Both England (Arts Council England 2011b) and Scotland (Museums Galleries Scotland 2013) run schemes (Designation and Recognition) that enable collections of non-national museums to be ‘badged’ as nationally significant, for example the musical and ethnographic collections at the Horniman Museum, London, or the shawl collection at Paisley Museum in Scotland.

#### DNC Wales

One common thread running through these examples is the focus on nationally significant collections. In contrast, the Welsh concept links all the collections of our nation. It is an inclusive rather than exclusive model, establishing the basic premise that locally significant items are as important as items deemed ‘nationally significant’. Like the library model in Australia, the DNC aims to reinforce a national system of cooperative collecting; key to this is a shared methodology for determining significance. The aspiration for the Welsh model will parallel that used in the listing of buildings and monuments (Cadw); items will be recognised as part of a DNC regardless of condition or institutional context. This generates a system for cooperative collections management defined by the content and themes relating to the collections themselves and supporting public access. To be defined as a DNC project there are common features set out in Table 1.

#### IMPLEMENTATION – THE FIRST STEPS

Following the commitment to develop the DNC, government, conservators, curators and researchers are working to translate the concept into practice via two case studies. Doliau, a study of 19th-century Welsh dolls, is developing an understanding of Welsh national costume using a collection type where items are considered as iconic and unlikely to ever be disposed of. In contrast, the Natural Science: Linking Natural Science Collections in Wales project aims to share skills and knowledge to support the use of natural science collections in the interpretation of the natural heritage of

**Table 1**  
Defining features of a DNC project

Scope	Activity	Outputs / Outcomes
A consensus across Wales on the definition of the distributed national collection and a commitment to work together.	Develop a coordinated national approach to collecting.	Improvements in collections management including conservation, collections care and documentation prioritised by collection and user need.
Collections of a specific type or theme.	Collection review to identify location of items, in a specific collections category.	Improved knowledge and understanding of the scope and needs of collections in Wales.
Operates consistently for all collections of a specific type regardless of Institutional affiliation.	Use the <i>Significance</i> template to identify and record significance of collections.	National perspective on acquisition and disposal.
Collections in Welsh Museums Libraries and Archives and other heritage organisations.	Develop sector-wide recognised listing of translations for technical or specialist terms relating to the collection covering the English and Welsh languages and dialects.	Shared resources that provide support for museum / heritage activities related to collections.
Collections with significance to the culture and heritage of Wales not held in Wales.	Identify collections management needs.	Sustainable collections.
Consideration of current and potential future use of collections.	Carry out a targeted programme of collections research.	Ability to search collections using multiple languages and terminologies including technical and vernacular.
Considers the needs of users and other stakeholders.	Disseminates information including exhibitions, publications and information on digital platforms such as People's Collection Wales.	Learning resources for a range of users.
	Develop joint programmes of work that provide services based on the needs of current and potential users.	Shared public resources.
	Considers relationship of collections provision to user demand.	

Wales. These collections tend to be large, poorly understood and susceptible to disposal. A key output for both projects is the development of bilingual terminologies.

Both case studies were initiated partly by serendipity and funding opportunities, but mainly by individual passion. Both embody the core values of the DNC and work across institutional boundaries to care for, interpret and use collections because of their significance. They each present challenges and barriers brought about by institutional differences in resources, agendas, policy frameworks, custom and practice.

#### Case study Doliau: A framework for sharing skills and raising standards

In 2011, the two-year project Doliau: Dolls as Evidence of Welsh National Costume was initiated as a partnership project between Ceredigion Museum, Cardiff University and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (AC–NMW). It looked at 19th-century Welsh costume dolls in UK public collections. Welsh costume is a central component of Welsh national visual culture; yet, in research terms, little attention had been paid to its origins and development. Most published material has concentrated on evidence from 18th- and early 19th-century travelogues and prints which overemphasise the unusual and quaint. Surviving costumes are difficult to date accurately, do not offer a complete picture and are often 20th-century recreations.

#### Research outputs and outcomes

In the first stage, 37 dolls were examined and analysed (Telford and Stoughton-Harris 2012) using a standard methodology designed as part of the project and an agreed bilingual terminology was developed. A study by Cardiff University (Kwon 2011) assessed further research potential:

the dolls were x-rayed and analytical methods researched that might help identify the provenance and production date of the dolls and costumes.

The second stage involves dissemination of information via a touring exhibition delivered by a consortium of museums. A secondary objective will develop working practices to sustainably enhance mobility of collections, especially those under the jurisdiction of AC–NMW. In common with many other museums, AC–NMW loan conditions specify that items from their collection can only be handled by AC–NMW staff. While the rationale for this is understandable, as staff will be trained to the level required, this apparently minor barrier could compromise the practical development of DNC. The DNC is about use and care of collections, not location, but in order to work, collections must be managed from a shared perspective. The Doliau project offered an opportunity to reflect on past practices and allowed participants to question familiar policy and practice. For example, barriers to lending were seen as operating in only one direction (national to local). From the national perspective, requirements were seen as museum staff being accountable for best practice, but from the local perspective, they could be perceived as a lack of professional respect or creating an insurmountable financial burden. The role of conservation as a barrier to access became a pertinent talking point.

For the DNC to be successful, a change in approach was required to shift the focus from managing collections to managing risks to collections.

#### Loans policies

Managing risks to collections enables a tailored approach to meet specific needs. This allows the skills of other museum professionals to be taken into consideration in determining an appropriate response to a loan request. This change in position was prompted by lessons learned through the Doliau project and is articulated through AC–NMW’s revised Loans Policy (AC–NMW 2012a), which explicitly states that ‘consideration will be given to the levels of training and experience of staff in handling similar objects at the borrowing institution’. The concern that this may compromise standards and increase risks to collections is addressed in the Loan Agreement (AC–NMW 2012b): ‘where the schedule indicates that you are permitted to handle the objects, only those people who have been trained to our satisfaction in handling the objects may do so’. The impact on AC–NMW is the requirement for an early assessment of the skill level within the borrowing institution and to up-skill where necessary. All parties need to fully understand and accept the risks arising from this approach.

It was acknowledged that conservators have a key role to play in advocating the protection of collections in ways that enable, rather than prevent, access. However, attempts to develop required skills in the wider profession in Wales uncovered a number of issues. The evaluation of the first round of training indicated that it needed to cover a broader range of issues. Although the content was sound, a better methodology is required to establish and measure outcomes, i.e. in demonstrating competence and establishing the criteria for recruiting trainees.

## Case study Taxonomy and Taxidermy: A framework for reinforcing the value of knowledge

The project Taxonomy and Taxidermy: Linking Natural Science Collections in Wales aims to allow museum staff, volunteers and the public to learn and to share knowledge of the natural heritage of Wales. Natural science collections across Wales are underused and at real risk of deterioration with no subject specialists working in museums outside AC–NMW. CyMAL's *Spotlight on Museums* data from 2011 (Welsh Government 2011) indicates that whilst these collections make up a significant proportion of collections across Wales, for many individual museums they represent only a small percentage of their collections. The project aims to build skills, confidence and capacity in staff and volunteers to improve understanding, enabling them to effectively use natural science collections. This is being achieved through a series of training programmes, collections reviews and peer review by experts from AC–NMW. The main public outputs will be an online multimedia resource and an exhibition celebrating these collections in the context of current issues such as biodiversity and climate change.

To achieve these aims, museums across Wales have undergone focussed collections reviews and the results are beginning to provide a clear picture of natural science collections across Wales, which will enable the development of a DNC strategy in this area. Health and safety issues are also being investigated.

The project has presented challenges in matching the limited knowledge in a local museum about its collections and the specialisms of the conservators and curators offering support. Discussions about scope of data to collect have not yet been fully resolved. Within the group differing priorities have been expressed for the depth and detail of the collection of a range of forms of data such as scientific and taxonomic, collections management information, condition, safety, associated stories and evidence related to the process of collecting.

### LESSONS LEARNED TO DATE

The case studies are helping to develop a shared understanding of what is meant by the DNC. They provide tangible examples of how the approach can work, and what is being learned can be used to further develop the methodology. The nature and commitment of the partnerships strengthens the growth of the DNC in Wales. It formalises the relationship between museums and supports easier sharing of objects, specimens and information. Good networks and good communication are key: these enable the development of a coordinated strategy to ensure the preservation of a nation's cultural material, and to facilitate broader physical and intellectual access to it. The pilots have helped to identify the challenges facing the profession in Wales and illustrate the need to locally embed knowledge. With a focussed approach, scarce resources for preventive conservation research and documentation can be targeted at the items considered most significant in context and in greatest need.

## THE NEXT STEPS

The DNC is a way for Wales to address issues of overcrowding in stores through developing a collecting policy that will mean less duplication and fewer gaps and ensuring that preventive conservation needs are understood and met. This holistic approach can democratise museum collections, an approach already underway digitally in Wales through People's Collection Wales.

Focus groups held in 2013 identified a number of the issues and opportunities involved in progressing the work. Participants were 'daunted and overwhelmed' but also 'excited and satisfied'. Positive benefits were identified, including joint training, collection care improvements, understanding collections, and a more strategic use of resources. Participants were asked to identify opportunities, which generated, among many suggestions, the concept of Wales with one national heritage service. Other suggestions also related to the breaking down of barriers: governance, professional, geographic or organisational. The barriers were considered and many centred on a fear of loss of control. The main priority is to build consensus and understanding of the concept in Wales.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of the DNC implies a shared responsibility for our heritage. As well as identifying what works, the case studies have highlighted where there are likely to be issues in working collaboratively with collections across a nation. The dolls project has enabled the development of a shared set of procedures and policies; the natural science project is developing a methodology for dealing with orphan collections – how to deal with scale, how to use the expertise, how to enact complex conservation and health and safety requirements for a diverse and vulnerable range of collections, and how to spread and embed those skills.

A nation's stories are the stories of its people and landscape and it is the role of the professional to ensure the survival of the supporting evidence, not to dictate a single narrative. Wales wants to identify areas of good practice and learn lessons from other countries. By doing so, a holistic approach can be developed to generate coordinated collecting, improve collections care, develop a greater understanding of the significance of collections, and improve public participation and access both within the collecting community and for the public. It is not just about pooling resources.

Currently, resources for preventive conservation are rarely considered a priority. However, progressing this work as part of a DNC in Wales puts preventive conservation into a broader context that identifies links through conservation and accessibility to a strengthened national cultural identity. By engaging in, or even leading a national project concerned with access and preservation, conservators have worked to ensure that conservation is seen as contributing to access, adding value to collections and staying on the national agenda. There is no doubt that there is still a very long journey ahead, but at least the first steps have been taken.

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