



New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Materials Pū Manaaki Kahurangi Annual Conference, 2018

Heritage is a living, active part of our communities. Conservation needs to be both responsive to each individual situation and responsible within its own set of wider professional ethics. As conservators, we are aware that our work takes place within a larger cultural context.

Whilst preservation remains at the core of what we do, we are at the intersection of materials-based conservation and values-based approaches.

At the 2018 NZCCM Conference in Auckland, we welcome discussion on current conservation practices and the challenges we face. This is an opportunity to share and hear about treatment methodologies, advances in the use and research of materials, solutions for display and storage, and ways in which the context of an artwork or object has informed decision making.

This article is a preprint of a presentation given at the NZCCM 2018 Conference "Living Heritage: Materials, Methods and Context", held at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki on October 24 - 26, 2018. Preprints from the conference were welcomed from all speakers, who included both full NZCCM members and affiliated professionals. Articles were not peer-reviewed; views presented are the authors' own and do not represent NZCCM or its members. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of and permissions required for the content of their articles, and retain copyright to their written ideas and photographs.

LIVING HERITAGE: THE OBJECT CONSERVATOR'S ROLE

SUSANNE GRIEVE

Critical discourse of conservation theory and practice is beginning to question ingrained principles that the profession was founded on. A heritage object becomes alive through creation and use. Living populations also add to the life of that object by projecting current values onto the past. Conservators must reflect on these theoretical considerations while practicing within the boundaries of a changing profession that is questioning the 'preservation ethic' and where allegiances lie: to the past, present or future? In this paper, I explore the notion of 'living heritage', assess the role of the objects conservator within this context and reflect on how living heritage challenges the current conservation ethic of preservation.

KEYWORDS: *heritage conservation; conservation theory; salvage paradigm; authorized heritage discourse; critical conservation studies; community; ethics; legislation*

1. LIVING HERITAGE INTERPRETED

Conservators rarely work in isolation. Even when alone with an object, there are numerous voices in and for the object; numerous people that have affected the creation and history of the object are present. Additionally, there are the actual, or living, voices of stakeholders that retain an interest in the conservation¹ process. In my interpretation, living heritage includes the concept of objects embodying characteristics through a living past, an obligation to living communities through a living present and a reflection on living heritage in the future.

1.1. A LIVING PAST

When available, the story of the previous life of a heritage object is often based on historical documents or oral histories. This would be commonly referred to as the 'use life' of the object described thoroughly by Caple (2006, sec. 1.6) in the Object Production Use Sequence. In the conservation of archaeological materials, evidence of wear or traces of the past use are generally retained in an effort to aide in the interpretation of the site, time period or person, particularly when documentary remains are scarce. Through a Western-based museum perspective, this information then becomes facts about the object on which conservators can base decision-making for treatment. In Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) an alternative view exists through the concept of mauri. Most closely interpreted as a life force within an animal, object or environment, mauri suggests that taonga are not given a life story, but rather possessed by one. These differing views

¹ Conservation and preservation are two commonly used terms that can be interpreted widely. The definition of each can vary based on specialty, personal background and views, geographic location or field of study. For the purposes of this paper, conservation can be interpreted as the specific interventive processes that accompany the stabilization of an object. Preservation is representative of the larger planning and management for that stabilization.

have implications in the use, interpretation and preservation of heritage objects²; however, both present an opportunity to see the past of an object as embodying that of a living past.

1.2. *A LIVING PRESENT*

Values related to the preservation of cultural heritage are based on the “present meaning of the past” (Winter 1966, 219, 249). These values can shift generationally, socially, and geographically (Atkinson 2014, 59). Though cultural heritage is traditionally perceived as having intrinsic value, it does not remain static and permanently assigned (Mason 2008, 100; Fairclough 2008, 299; Callicott 1987, 219; Harrison 2013, 145). Changing values of the living present related to heritage objects of the past then have the potential to influence social and heritage policy.

Perhaps the easiest way to classify the values of the living present is through identifying the communities that are stakeholders in heritage conservation processes. Community is a concept used to describe behaviours and relationships. There are a number of communities that have a vested interest in heritage practices. The most obvious are heritage **professionals**, of which conservators can be classified. Viewing this community through the lens of the conservator specifically, allied professionals such as materials scientists, curators, archaeologists and architects, are also concerned with conservation outcomes.

Additionally, **owners** of cultural heritage objects and artistic works retain a position in the conservation conversation even overseeing outcomes. This population includes managing agencies (i.e. museums, heritage organizations, government entities), collectors (assuming the collection is legal) and ancestors of the manufacturers or owners of the object.

Lastly, I present the **users** of heritage as a broad collective. These parties can be further divided into groups such as tourists and avocationals. Users are termed as such to indicate the active role they have in not only interacting with heritage sites and objects, but also their influence on heritage conservation.

1.3. *A LIVING FUTURE*

If we reflect on the past 200 years of any society, about 5 generations, there will be great differences in how objects were created, used, valued and preserved (Lowenthal 1985). This would indicate that the next 200 years would also produce very different social perspectives and behaviours towards heritage objects than what we can fathom now. It is then impossible to predict what these future generations and living heritage communities will desire from conservation processes. However, as conservators, we are continually making conservation decisions on behalf of these future generations, but with one main goal: ensuring long-term stabilization.

2. THE OBJECT CONSERVATOR’S ROLE

In the above section, I have reflected on one interpretation of living heritage through a past, present and future context. In this next section, I hope to further explore the role of the object conservator in that temporal framework by examining conservation as a profession within academia and in a

² Discussions of Western/Colonial/European centered museum models and the incorporation of indigenous community perspectives is discussed extensively in the academic literature. See (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Kreps 2008; McCarthy 2016; Simpson 2001; Sleeper-Smith 2009) for overviews.

broader context of community. This is concluded by describing the boundaries in which conservators operate to achieve preservation outcomes.

2.1. *CONSERVATORS IN ACADEMIA*

What is the place of the conservation profession in a broader academic framework? Depending on your avenue of entry into the profession and your country of origin, you may answer this question differently from others. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, the only academic heritage conservation-training programme is at the University of Auckland and is located under the Faculty of Arts and School of Humanities. Overseas, this level of training is often found under Colleges of Arts or combined with Arts and Sciences. For the purposes of this paper, I interpret the Humanities and Social Sciences as two separate approaches in the journey to the conservation profession. Using this model, as an objects conservator with a background in anthropology and archaeology, my perspective is shaped through the social sciences; however, art history or visual arts trained conservators may view the profession through the humanities and conservation scientists will be influenced through the natural sciences. This highlights the diversity of training one can undertake before the amalgamation of these foundations into art and heritage conservation studies and demonstrates the importance of having a balanced approach by gaining experience in the other fields.

Heritage can be simply defined as ‘connections to the past’. Through my foundation in the social sciences and geographical perspective of New Zealand, I further evaluate the academic place of the conservator in the context of Heritage Studies. Heritage Studies attempts to provide critical analyses of how professionals interpret these connections to the past, but how are these theories implemented into practice? This is done through Cultural Heritage Management (CHM), a broad term encompassing concepts of heritage, identity, authenticity, preservation, and access (Fowler 1982, 1). North American models classify CHM as a branch of Cultural Resources Management (CRM), however, CRM is a term originating in the United States and is more commonly used to describe archaeological processes outside of academic environments (Cody and Fong 2012; Garrow 2015; Green 2015; Jameson 2008). In Australia, CRM is further defined as archaeological heritage management (Smith 1993).

Considering the above, I then place myself as a heritage conservation professional within the practice of Cultural Heritage Management under a field of Heritage Studies, which is included in the Social Sciences discipline (see fig. 1).

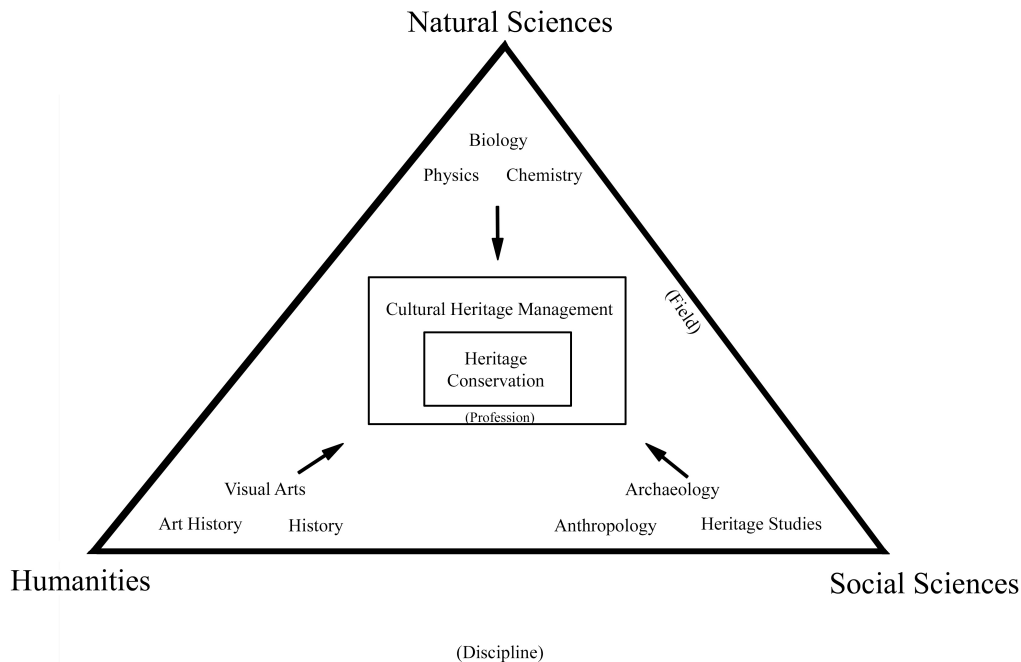


FIG 1: Diagram of the position of heritage conservation within academia.

2.2. CONSERVATORS IN THE COMMUNITY

Now that I have established the position of the conservation profession within living professional communities through my perspective, it is important to reflect on what the role of the objects conservator is within the broader community focusing on owners and users of heritage.

People are not divorceable from the object, as demonstrated in the New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Materials Pū Manaaki Kahurangi (NZCCM) Code of Ethics (2006, sec. 5.1): “The opinions, wishes and views of the owner, custodian or other responsible person must be fully acknowledged and considered when discussing a proposal for conservation.”

When conservators work for institutions, they are entrusted to make informed treatment decisions based on their training, which may mean without input from the owner or user of that heritage. In this situation, conservators represent and advocate for the interests of the general public, for the institutions they work for or for the communities that may not have a seat at the decision-making table. The conservation profession is predicated on the community trust that professionals make the best possible decisions for the long-term preservation of our collective cultural heritage.

Realistically, there is some assumption that it would be an impossible task to find consensus for preservation among such diverse living communities; therefore, boundaries of best practices are established to ensure conservators are operating at a high standard with primarily the interests of the heritage object in mind.

2.3. BOUNDARIES OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Conservators have two aspects of the profession to consider when working with the preservation of material culture: theoretical and practical. Where the practical is focused on materials science,

technologies and logistics, the theoretical is more subjective. Some examples of theoretical considerations may include assessing heritage values, incorporating the wants and needs of the source community or including the customs and traditions that surround the use of the object in treatment processes. These theoretical approaches in conserving cultural heritage in New Zealand are largely bound by the NZCCM Code of Ethics, legislation (statutes and regulations) and object owner desires.

2.3.1. Code of Ethics

The basis for theoretical conservation practice within New Zealand can be found in the vision, values and Code of Ethics through the NZCCM, which serves as an interest group and professional advocacy organization. While frequently debated and reevaluated, ethics are manifested in practice and are more representative of the norms and standards of a group (Eastop 2011; Edson 1997; Scarre and Scarre 2006; Stark 2011). Professional ethics will never serve as a blanket representation of what all professionals agree with (Hamilakis 2007). The NZCCM Code of Ethics is composed of general guiding principles that underpin how professionals interact with other conservators, clients, communities and the material culture itself. It provides a common understanding and language for which we base our expectations of professional behaviour.

2.3.2. Legislation

New Zealand legislation and cultural laws can also have an impact on professional practice. Current legislation directly related to heritage protection is limited to:

1. Legal ramifications for damage or modification to buildings and sites dating pre-AD1900 (independent of whether they are known or identified) through the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014;
2. Legal ramifications in the unregistered trade of rare or significant objects through the Protected Objects Act 1975.
3. 'Recognition' (not legal protection) for the significance of sites listed on the New Zealand Heritage List Rārangi Kōrero. The legal protection is enforced if these sites (or those listed on Council management plans) are impacted through the Resource Management Act 1991;
4. A process of 'gazetting' that provides the same legal protections to sites that are post-AD1900 as those under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014;
5. Heritage covenants which establish an agreement between property owners and Heritage New Zealand to guide future development and changes to heritage sites.

This leaves sites and objects dating post-AD1900 open to no legal recognition or protection, particularly if they are not nationally significant or rare.

2.3.3. Object Owner Desires

In many cases, the desires of the object owner can guide the conservation treatment process. Owners may be represented as:

- private individuals and ancestors with a personal connection to the object;
- collectors who obtained the object through purchase or souveniring; or,
- as a large organization that manages the object on behalf of the government or the public.

Conservators can generally communicate best practices for long-term stabilization as experts. Conflict arises when the owner's wishes are not consistent with professional standards or law.

3. CHALLENGING CURRENT PRACTICES

According to the NZCCM Code of Ethics (2006, sec. 4.0), 'The first responsibility of the conservator is to the object and to its long-term preservation'. There is a strong argument here for a broader interpretation of object to include site or building due to the larger variety of specialties within conservation; in either case, the professional role is seemingly clearly defined: ensure long-term stabilization.

The boundaries that conservators operate within are defined by living heritage communities. While some core ethics will likely always be retained through changing professional generations, they represent a snapshot of the living professional practice. How, then, do conservators working with living heritage communities challenge an ethos of preservation?

3.1. SALVAGE PARADIGM

A current issue in CHM is whether preservation should be the primary aim. Harrison (2013, 167) suggests the origins in the desire to preserve is founded in the 'salvage paradigm' and memory discourses of the late 20th century movements of modernity. Smith (1993, 65–66) also describes this 'conservation ethic' but remains neutral in interpreting preservation as a dichotomy of good or bad. Conservators view preservation as an inherently 'good' thing and that it is a goal for all communities involved. However, this assumption is increasingly being challenged in the discourse on preservation. Scott-Ireton and McKinnon (2015, 159) describe 'de-centering preservation and protection and instead re-centring the public'. The focus is then placed on the heritage as it exists now and not how it will exist in the future. Harrison (2013, 230) highlights the professional ethical obligations to the heritage when he '...cautions against becoming too complacent about heritage as something that is always necessarily positive or benign.' **Conservation professionals need to question whether interventive conservation efforts are inherently 'good' for an object.**

3.2. AUTHORIZED HERITAGE DISCOURSE

In Heritage Studies, the predominant critical analysis challenging professional norms is Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). AHD incorporates notions of expert-driven value, which is the declaration of significance for heritage by experts with limited consideration of public values. This is explained by Jones (2017, 22) as 'expert-driven modes of significance assessment tend to focus on historic and scientific values, and consequently often fail to capture the dynamic, iterative and embodied nature of people's relationships with the historic environment in the present'. Harrison (2013, 111) reiterates this by adding 'decisions about what constitutes heritage (and, perhaps equally importantly, what does not) are made by 'experts', and the representations that are produced from their select canon of heritage are thus exclusive of minorities, the working classes and subaltern groups'.

AHD, a critical discussion first proposed by Smith (2006), observes that heritage practices are limited and controlled by those with an authorized voice, such as experts, with the majority of archaeology and cultural heritage conservation theory based on a 'Western' interpretation (Harrison 2013, 110; Heyd 2005; Jones 2017, 25; E. D. Pishief 2012; Smith 2006). Pishief (2017, 64) considers this theory from a New Zealand perspective by introducing the 'Iwi Heritage Discourse'

when examining relationships between Pākehā and Māori communities and describes that ‘...Māori have their own ways of practicing heritage within their own framework...’.

The AHD can be used to explore the dominance of one community over another and highlights the divides that can occur between the realm of the public and the ivory tower of the professional. **Conservation professionals need to acknowledge the existence of the AHD within heritage practices and attempt to eliminate it by creating one community of practice where there is no single ‘authorized’ voice.**

3.3. ‘CRITICAL CONSERVATION STUDIES’

As Sully (2007; 2015) highlights, cultural heritage conservation was established with a focus on the materiality of objects; however, ingrained in these practices is an appreciation and consideration of the intangible characteristics that are imbued in the tangible. Modern critical analysis of the conservation profession mirrors that of post-processual public archaeological practices through ‘privileging a community’s cultural systems over universalized concepts of heritage’ and promoting community-based participatory practices (D. Sully 2015). The heritage studies and conservation theory literature promotes a ‘bottom up’ based relationship framework essentially turning Western administrative heritage hierarchies up-side down to encourage ‘grass-roots’ communities to be given higher consideration (Harrison 2010; McCarthy 2015; Schofield 2008, 20–21; Dean Sully 2007; D. Sully 2015). McCarthy (2015) provides a thorough overview of the disparity between academic theory and practical applications in museum environments and highlights the lack of a voice from practitioners in the professional scholarship. While there are calls for inclusivity and the destruction of official forms of heritage appearing to become more prevalent in the literature, the implementation in practice appears to be lagging: ‘...social value and related forms of public participation have become increasingly prominent in international heritage frameworks and the conservation policies and guidelines of national heritage bodies. Yet they remain relatively marginal in many areas of heritage practice’ (Jones 2017, 33). **Conservation professionals need to engage with more communities that influence practices.**

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, all heritage objects embody living heritage, both through the past life of the object and to the living through changing interpretations and values of new generations. Conservation professionals continue to challenge current codes of ethics and critical thinking in the field by assessing decision-making processes against currently held standards. This paper demonstrates this through questioning the inherent good of the salvage paradigm, the authorized heritage discourse and introduction of critical conservation studies. Practical examples of how other professional ethics are currently being evaluated are through issues of retreatment, digitization, extent of restoration and treating objects of trauma (Hatchfield 2013). By adhering to the principle ethic that our primary obligation is to the long-term stabilization of the object, we can ensure one thing: it will exist for the debate to continue into the next generation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the NZCCM colleagues who helped shaped the paper into constructive dialogue, my Ph.D. advisors, Dr. Conal McCarthy and Dr. Lee Davidson, whose work inspires new perspectives into my practice as a conservator and to the communities and individuals that have shared their perspectives and passion for heritage.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J. 2014. *Education, Values and Ethics in International Heritage: Learning to Respect*. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Callicott, J.B. 1987. "The philosophical value of wildlife." In *Economic and Social Values of Wildlife*, ed. D.J. Decker and G. Goff. 214–21. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Caple, C. 2006. *Objects: Reluctant witnesses to the past*. London: Routledge.
- Cody, J.W., and K.L. Fong. 2012. "Beyond band-aids: The need for specialised materials conservation expertise in Asia." In *Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia*, eds. P. Daly and T. Winter. 98–110. New York: Routledge.
- Eastop, D. 2011. "Conservation practice as enacted ethics." In *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. by J. Marstine. 426–44. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Edson, G. 1997. "Ethics and the profession." In *Museum Ethics*, ed. G. Edson. 18–35. London: Routledge.
- Edwards, E., C. Gosden, and R. Phillips. 2006. *Sensible objects: Colonialism, museums and material culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Fairclough, G. 2008. "New heritage, an introductory essay-people, landscape and change." In *The Heritage Reader*, eds. G. Fairclough et. al. 297–312. New York: Routledge
- Fowler, D.D. 1982. "Cultural resources management." *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 5: 1–50.
- Garrow, P.H. 2015. "Cultural resource management." *Oxford Bibliographies*.
<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0104.xml> (accessed 10/22/2018).
- Green, T.J. 2015. "Cultural resource management: Conservation of cultural heritage." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. J. Wright. 488–90. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Hamilakis, Y. 2007. "From ethics to politics." In *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethics to Politics*, eds. Y. Hamilakis and P.G. Duke. 15–40. One World Archaeology Series 54. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Harrison, R. 2010. "What is heritage?" In *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, ed. R. Harrison. 5–42. New York, NY: Manchester University Press.
- . 2013. *Heritage: Critical approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Hatchfield, P., ed. 2013. *Ethics & critical thinking in conservation*. Washington DC: American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works.
- Heyd, T. 2005. "Nature, culture, and natural heritage: Toward a culture of nature." *Environmental Ethics* 27 (4): 339–54.
- Jameson, J.H. 2008. "Cultural heritage management in the United States: Past, present, and future." In *The Heritage Reader*, eds. G. Fairclough et. al. 42–61. New York: Routledge
- Jones, S. 2017. "Wrestling with the social value of heritage: Problems, dilemmas and opportunities." *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 4 (1): 21–37.

- Kreps, C. 2008. *Indigenous Curation, Museums, and Intangible Cultural Heritage*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Lowenthal, D. 1985. *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mason, R. 2008. Assessing values in conservation planning. In *The Heritage Reader*, eds. G. Fairclough et. al. 99–124. New York, NY: Routledge.
- McCarthy, C. 2015. "Introduction: Grounding museum studies: Introducing practice." In *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, eds. S. Macdonald and H.R. Leahy. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- . 2016. *Museums and Maori : Heritage professionals, indigenous collections, current practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Material. 2006. "Code of ethics." Accessed October 22, 2018. <http://www.nzccm.org.nz/code-of-ethics>.
- Pishief, E. 2017. "Engaging with Māori and archaeologists: Heritage theory and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand." In *Engaging Heritage, Engaging Communities*, eds. B. Onciul et. al. 55-72. Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer.
- Pishief, E.D. 2012. "Constructing the identities of place: An exploration of Māori and archaeological heritage practices in Aotearoa New Zealand." Wellington: Victoria University Wellington.
- Scarre, C., and G. Scarre. 2006. *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schofield, J. 2008. "Heritage management, theory, and practice." In *The Heritage Reader*, eds. G. Fairclough et. al. 15–30. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Scott-Ireton, D.A., and J.F. McKinnon. 2015. "As the sand settles: Education and archaeological tourism on underwater cultural heritage." *Public Archaeology* 14 (3): 157–171.
- Simpson, M.G. 2001. *Making representations : Museums in the post-Colonial era*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sleeper-Smith, S. 2009. *Contesting knowledge: Museums and indigenous perspectives*. U of Nebraska Press.
- Smith, L. 1993. "Towards a theoretical framework for archaeological heritage management." *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 12 (1): 55–75.
- . 2006. *Uses of heritage*. First edition. London New York: Routledge.
- Stark, J.C. 2011. "The art of ethics: Theories and applications to museum practice." In *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. J. Marstine. 26–40. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Sully, D. 2015. "Conservation theory and practice: Materials, values, and people in heritage conservation." In *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, eds. by S. Macdonald and H.R. Leahy. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sully, D., ed. 2007. *Decolonizing conservation: Caring for Maori meeting houses outside New Zealand*. Walnut Creek, Calif: Routledge.
- Winter, G. 1966. *Elements for a social ethic: Scientific and ethical perspectives on social process*. New York: Macmillan.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Susanne Grieve is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Museum and Heritage Studies Programme at Victoria University Wellington and is also in private practice as a Principal with HPFS Solutions (Pacific) and Global Artifact Preservation Services (North and Central America). Her work centres on the preservation of cultural materials from historical and archaeological environments with a focus on maritime heritage.

Susanne Grieve
Victoria University Wellington,
Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies,
Kelburn, Wellington 6012.
Susanne.Grieve@vuw.ac.nz.