

Never let me go?

**A case study of deaccessioning and disposal
undertaken at Museum of Wellington City and Sea**

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Abstract

In the current economic climate museums are increasingly being asked to do more with less. For museums that hold collections, this poses a unique challenge. With the cost of collections being relentlessly accumulative, questions are being raised about the long term financial sustainability of current collecting practices. Deaccessioning is being suggested as a way in which museums can improve the quality of their collection without increasing its size. Yet the literature on deaccessioning suggests that the process is fraught with ethical and practical difficulties. By highlighting the negatives aspects of the process, writing in museum studies and practice does little to explore how deaccessioning might be used to achieve positive outcomes.

This research addresses this gap by asking whether deaccessioning is a positive tool that, if used appropriately, can assist a museum in improving the quality and manageability of their collection through systematic planning. To understand *how* and *why* a museum may permanently remove objects from their collection, the study focuses on one New Zealand museum's response to the challenge of redeveloping a collection through the process of deaccessioning and disposal. The Museum of Wellington City and Sea's deaccessioning process is analysed through documentary research and interviews with Museum staff. The interviews offer an understanding of the thought processes and motivations involved in selecting objects to be deaccessioned. The data collected reveals both the challenging aspects of the process but also offers insights into how these aspects can be mitigated or resolved.

The conclusions presented in this dissertation suggest that deaccessioning is an integral part of current museum practice that can be used positively to actively shape and refine a museum collection. I argue that some of the beneficial outcomes of the process include greater understanding of collections, improved knowledge and context, resolution of historical collecting problems, strategic relationships built with other museums and improvement in how objects are stored and utilised. More importantly deaccessioning allows museums to determine the character and content of their collections. In order for this to be achieved, I recommend that museums adopt a rational approach to reviewing their collections that is multi-disciplinary, transparent and acknowledges how their collection is used in the achievement of their institution's mission.

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Introduction

Deaccessioning and disposal are contested museum practices. Since their outset, museums have been acquiring and removing objects in order to shape the content and focus of their collections (Miller 1997, 52). While there is a general acceptance that museums need to continue to develop their collections through new acquisitions, many museum professionals along with the public remain uncomfortable with the idea that museums may on occasion also remove objects. The deaccessioning debate has been brought to the fore by the recent global recession which has highlighted the various challenges the museum sector faces. These challenges include dwindling funding pools and the accumulating cost of collection care and preservation. Within the current economic climate museums have to operate more sustainably and ensure that they remain relevant to their audiences. As part of strategies for collection sustainability, deaccessioning and disposal are sometimes suggested as useful collection management tools that can be used to control the content and manageability of a collection.

While deaccessioning is becoming a more accepted practice, the academic and professional literature has up till now predominately focused on the negative and challenging aspects of the process. It is almost as if deaccessioning is seen within some quarters of the museum sector as something that museums should not be doing. This may have to do with the process being perceived by some museum professionals as being in direct opposition to their responsibility towards the preservation and care of collections. Largely absent from the literature is any detailed analysis of the details and the outcomes of the process that provides concrete examples of what a museum has achieved through deaccessioning. The aim of this research is to address this gap and challenge negative perceptions of deaccessioning by exploring the benefits that can be achieved, whilst also understanding the challenges that a museum faces when removing objects from its collection

Background

This topic came about through a wider personal interest in museum sustainability. Although I have worked in the museum sector for a relatively short time one of the obvious areas of concerns that I have come across is the lack of space to store and house expanding collections. This is an area of concern that has been identified at the museum where I currently work. The issue has arisen because storerooms at the museum are nearing capacity and there is a desire to expand exhibition space that is currently being used to store objects. One of the solutions proposed by the museum has included finding alternative off site storage. However this is an expensive option. To my knowledge, deaccessioning collections that fall outside the museum's collecting scope has never been offered up as a solution. To me this seems to be an obvious fix to the problem as the museum holds a number of collections unrelated to their collecting mandate or that offer little value as research objects to the organisation. Whilst the museum has a process for deaccessioning collection objects, it is little utilised. Speaking with colleagues involved with proposing objects to be deaccessioned, they raised concerns that the process was time consuming, provided little reward for the staff time involved and was not a priority for the museum or the board who had to approve objects for deaccessioning. I became curious about whether other museums in New Zealand were deaccessioning objects from their collection and if they faced the same restraints when proposing objects to be removed. In discussion with colleagues who had worked at regional museums around New Zealand they spoke of museums using less formal deaccessioning and disposal processes when removing objects from collections. Some of the processes that were recounted included museum staff voting by a show of hands at a meeting on objects to be deaccessioned and the disposal of collections through sale to a scrap metal yard. These anecdotes suggested that while deaccessioning was being undertaken by museums in New Zealand there were not clear sector wide guidelines governing how it was being carried out.

As I consider the never-ending expansion of collections and the ongoing costs associated with collection care to be one of the most pressing issues facing museums today, I wanted to research what was being done by a New Zealand museum to address this issue. In providing a case study of a museum that is utilising deaccessioning and disposal as a method to focus their collection I was able to document what benefits could be gained by using the process. What I found as the

research progressed was that my original assumptions about deaccessioning being used to resolve storage and resourcing issues was not as strong as I originally anticipated. Instead what the research revealed was that deaccessioning has far wider potential benefits for museums.

Literature Review

This dissertation is in museum studies, a field of enquiry which considers the history, theory and practice of collections, exhibitions and programmes within museums today. Collections are an essential aspect of current professional museum practice. As Sharon MacDonald notes “the assembly, preservation, and display of collections – is fundamental to the idea of the museum, even if not all “museums” directly engage in it” (2006, 241). Tristram Besterman similarly asserts that collections are at the heart of museums and form “their life-blood and *raison d’être*” (1992, 29). Within the field of museum studies much has been written about museum collections. Literature is available on how museum collections have been amassed (see MacDonald 2006; Young, 1999), and what museum collections mean to their various audiences (see Pearce 1994; Dudley 2010).

The aim of this research is to explore an aspect of institutional collecting and museum practice, whereby accessioned objects are permanently removed in order to improve the overall quality and manageability of a museum collection. It is informed by an understanding of how and why objects enter collections, which often provides the rationale for deaccessioning. It specifically investigates whether the quality of a museum’s collection can be improved as much by the removal of objects as it is by the acquisition of new ones. Implicit to this research is examining how museums develop strategies for reviewing and developing their collections and how deaccessioning is utilised within these strategies. It is important to note that this research only examines deaccessioning undertaken explicitly to improve the overall quality of collections and not for other reasons. For instance, it does not include deaccessioning for ethical reasons, such as the disposal of human remains or deaccessioning of hazardous material.

Traditionally not all museums have been strategic in the way in which they have collected. Objects often entered museum collections based on personal aesthetic biases of museum staff, through poor judgement, were accepted as favours or because of donor stipulations. As Steven Miller highlights “things enter museum collections for many reasons, not all of which are grounded in a well-meaning desire for patrimonial preservation or aesthetic enlightenment” (1997, 52). With the introduction of more modern management methods in the 1960s, museums came to realise the rate at which their collections were growing and the economic burden these collections represented. There was also a realisation that these institutions were holding “indiscriminately acquired objects in quantities vastly greater than the institutions responsible for their care might ever conceivably use” (Weil 2004, 284).

There is a general consensus amongst most authors writing on institutional collecting that the current way in which museums collect and hold their existing collections is unsustainable. James Gardner (forthcoming 2014), Keith Thomson (2002), Mycal Brown (2012) and John Holt (2011) all cite rising costs for caring, preserving, insuring and storing collections along with the reduction in funding pools as the reason museums are reconsidering their approach towards their collections and collecting practices. Gardner also adds, with the cost of care being “relentlessly cumulative” each year, museums are having to dedicate more and more funds towards their collections as they continue to acquire more objects thus placing a heavy financial burden on future generations (forthcoming 2014, 8). A 2006 study conducted by Nick Merriman and released by UK Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)¹ also concluded that “the continued indefinite expansion of museum collections is not a realistic option especially in the light of ongoing difficulties with documentation, conservation and adequate storage of existing collections” (Merriman 2006, 24). As a result, museums will need to dedicate more and more funds toward collection maintenance with fewer funds available for other museum programmes and activities (Thomson 2002, 59).

Accepting that museums cannot continue to expand their collections indefinitely, deaccessioning and disposal offers a practical solution to storage, collection and resourcing issues. Furthermore

¹ ¹ Museums Libraries and Archives Council UK (MLA) was abolished in May 2012 as part of a proposal put forward by the British Conservative Party to reduce public bodies funded by UK government. Functions formerly performed by MLA have been transferred to Arts Council England and the National Archives (UK).

Stephen Weil proposes that due to collecting being a “more deliberate and purposive activity than it was in the past” many believe that collections can “benefit from periodic thinning” (2004, 286). Thomson echoes this thought suggesting that it is possible for museums to be able to upgrade the quality of their collections without increasing their size (2002, 95). This idea is similarly expressed by Tomislav Sola, who states that “it is possibly true that most museums could reduce their collections to a minimal size without seriously harming their value”, but in order to do this the profession needs to question the “sanctity of collections” (1999, 195).

According to Patricia Ainslie, collections should not be viewed as ‘absolute entities’ and deaccessioning and disposal are a “direct consequence of acquisition’ (1999, 178). Ainslie’s view of institutional collections suggests a cyclical approach whereby the character and emphasis of a collection is continuously shaped through the process of acquisition and disposal. In this model accessioning and deaccessioning are complementary processes that are both used to focus and refine the quality of a collection. What are the advantages of a focused collection and how do museums define what should be in the collection? Weil defines what should be collected or retained by the institutional collector as an evaluation of the utility of an object and its usefulness to a museum in carrying out their institutional mission (2004, 290). The advantage of a well focused and defined collection is that it arguably places museums in a better position to serve their audiences. The result of a wide ranging collection that lacks focus, according to Warner Haldane, is that it provides limited material to draw upon for any one topic and is not able cover any subject in great depth. Marketing a museum under these circumstances becomes problematic as the museum lacks specific themes to attract an audience (1992, 3).

Gardner and Elizabeth Merritt propose that museums need to go further than simply adhering to collection policies, arguing that museums need to develop a collection plan that will shape the content of their collections and is integrated with other museum activities such as education and exhibitions (2004, 293). While collection policies and collection scope are useful in that they dictate what conditions must be met for an object to be acquired and what types of objects are collected, including for example considerations such as date range, geographic origin, subject matter or physical condition, Gardner and Merritt argue that with museum staff often collecting in isolation, keeping to these policies does not always result in a cohesive collection whereby all

the parts add up to a whole (2004, 293). Instead, they recommend that museums need disciplined and focused collection planning that “brings together staff from across departmental boundaries” (2004, 293) in order to implement a strategic plan that “guides the content of the collections” by focusing “the ideas, concepts, stories, or themes that provide the rationale for the museum’s collection decisions” (forthcoming 2014, 5). A collections plan also addresses issues around resource allocation, financial costs and strategic partnerships with other museums and if necessary deaccessioning unwanted collections (forthcoming 2014, 5).

Gardner and Merritt’s recommendation for an inclusive approach to collection planning that integrates collections, exhibits and educational activities, while also taking into account resources, is an interesting framework to evaluate collection quality and manageability. Gardner and Merritt identify collection plans as essentially containing five key components that contribute to creating a coherent, focused collection. These include understanding the museum’s audience and how their needs will be serviced by the collections, having an understanding and a knowledge of the collection which is shared throughout the institution, developing themes that provide context for assessing collections, prioritising acquisitions and deaccessions based on needs assessment and gap analysis, and identifying beneficial partnerships with other museums and institutions (Gardner and Merritt 2004, 295).

Deaccessioning and disposal within the context of a collection plan is carried out to shape an existing collection to ensure that objects are not being retained without purpose and that resources are not being unnecessarily allocated to maintain objects that do not fit in with the overall mission of the museum. In order for this to occur, Gardner suggests that museums need to step away from describing what the “museum *has* and develop a vision for what the collections *should be*” (forthcoming 2014, 25). Similarly, Weil asserts that it should be the museum’s mission “that shapes the collection and not the converse: that the collection can forever be accumulated willy-nilly and the mission subsequently reshaped from time to time to somehow fit around it” (Weil 2004, 290).

One of the biggest barriers to deaccessioning highlighted in the literature is challenging the notion that once an object enters into a collection then it should be held there in perpetuity. Miller

asserts that there is an assumption from people visiting museums that “what they see there was acquired and is being preserved, for them, in perpetuity” (1997, 52). Emma Meyer’s unpublished research into the notion of perpetuity in Wellington museum collections revealed that the concept of deaccessioning is also challenging for many museum professionals who see it as their role to collect and care for objects rather than dispose of them with one museum professional stating that “deaccessioning is philosophically opposed to what we do” (2006, 14). Museum staff often feel anxiety about permanently removing objects from collections. A possible reason for this Thomson suggests is that “no one wants to take responsibility for deciding that something should not be saved” (2002, 74). Moreover Thomson states that today when every object is seen to have worth “it is easy to see why museums never get rid of things” (2002, 70). Dayna Caldwell attributes the reluctance to deaccession to the frustration felt when information is inaccessible. This frustration then motivates material hoarding based on a loss of information caused by previous decisions which are seen by today’s standards as mistakes (2011, 47). However, H. Wilkinson insists that museum staff who are comfortable in exercising their professional opinion in making decisions on what to collect or not collect should be able to use the same approach to disposals (cited in Davies 2011, 26).

While various writers accept that deaccessioning plays a part in good collection management there are also those that raise issues with the process. Tiffany Jenkins claims that “history shows that the few disposals that have taken place in the past were regretted” (2011, 77). Jenkins provides examples of items that museum staff have regretted deaccessioning. These items included chairs which were commissioned by Venetian Doge Paolo Renier and deaccessioned by the Victoria & Albert Museum (London) as a poor quality nineteenth century reproduction. Jenkins argument that the majority of deaccessions are regretted is however brought into question by her selective use of examples. She has only selected to use examples that favour her argument, ignoring the many deaccessioning decisions that were not regretted.

John Rewald questioned the deaccessioning carried out at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the 1970s, highlighting valid concerns with the process. Rewald argues that the process should not be used even if driven for curatorial reasons as “artistic values are subject to fluctuation” (1997, 24). Backing up this argument Thomson also warns against contemporary

fashion being used as a guide to judge “long-term cultural worth and significance” (2002, 70). Another issue that Rewald raised is whether staff attachments to certain types of works has influenced decisions on whether works are deaccessioned or retained. As Rewald claims “continued over the years, each successive director could demolish departments that predecessors had knowingly and painstakingly built up. From ‘refinement’ to ‘refinement’, the Metropolitan would see its collections disrupted if not liquidated” (1997, 27).

A more practical barrier preventing museums from deaccessioning that is raised by Peter Davies (2011, 25), Suzanne Keene (2005, 179) and Terri Anderson (2011, 245) is the heavy costs involved in permanently removing collections. The process is also time-consuming if carried out appropriately and as Jessica Hadfield remarks “it transpires in terms of the guidelines imposed that the deaccession and removal of an object from the collection is a more laborious process than the accession and acceptance into the collection of an object” (2011, 93). Research conducted for the Museum Associations (MA) *Collections for the Future* report (2005) concluded with similar findings, reporting that the key barrier to deaccessioning was process rather than policy and museums viewed deaccessioning as a low priority and “a distraction, and an entirely negative use of time and energy” (Davies 2011, 25). However, Hadfield stresses that the implication for museums refusing to acknowledge the potential for disposals, along with current collecting rates, is that they are causing themselves greater problems in the long term (2011, 94).

Once a museum has deaccessioned an object, the second stage is deciding the appropriate method of disposal. A multitude of disposal methods are available to museums including public sale by auction, transfer to another public museum or institution, return to the former owner, destruction or internal transfer within the same museum, for example for use in hands-on educational exhibits. In the interest of keeping objects in the public domain, many writers advocate for disposal through transfer by sale, exchange or donation to another public museum or public institution (see Haldane 1992, 16; Miller 1997, 94; Besterman 1992, 39). This is a view that is also maintained by the Museums Association UK (MA), who suggest that where possible and as a first option, deaccessioned objects should remain in the public domain (Museums Association, 2008). This method of disposal requires, according to Stefanie Jandl and Mark Gold, the disposing museum to sacrifice sale proceeds and their desire to achieve the best financial result

for their institution in the interest of public access (Jandl and Gold 2011, 334). While disposal through transfer to another museum or public institution can achieve the best outcome for the object, the public and museums involved, there are writers who are sceptical that this is always the best approach. Thomson expresses concern that as more and more museums face storage and funding issues, disposing museums may find it difficult to locate other institutions that will be able to accept unwanted collections (2002, 95). Similarly, Merriman questions the long-term viability of disposal by transfer and suggests that this will lead to a “merry-go-around” situation whereby collections are passed from one institution to another (2006, 30). Staff at Glenbow Museum, Canada, involved with deaccessioning and disposing of collections raised similar questions regarding decisions made by some museums who had selected objects from them that were in poor condition or of unknown provenance. Staff questioned whether these institutions may invariably have to eventually deaccession the material they were selecting from their own institutions (Betenia et al. 2011, 213).

Much of the deaccessioning literature available describes disposal and deaccessioning carried out in museums in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. I was only able to locate two published articles on deaccessioning in New Zealand museums - a short journal article on deaccessioning at the National Maritime Museum in Auckland (Spalding 2005) and a guide to developing acquisition and disposal policies in local museums (Haldane 1992). The first article reports on why and how objects were deaccessioned at Voyager (National Maritime Museum) and does so from the perspective of their registrar. However the article does not go into great depth on the deaccessioning process. For instance while Vicky Spalding states the criteria required for an artefact to be considered for deaccessioning, information on the actual practical process undertaken to evaluate artefacts and which members of staff were involved in making these decisions is not provided. Spalding also does not provide thoughts on how the museum dealt with ethical or legal challenges to deaccessioning, nor any consideration of deaccessioning within a New Zealand context.

Haldane’s guide offers recommendations for deaccessioning and disposal clauses that should be contained within a museums Collecting and Disposal Policy. Recommendations in the guide include that deaccessioning decisions be carried out by the same acquisitions committee that

decide on collecting, that reasonable attempts must be made to consult with groups or organisations that have a concern for the type of object being disposed and that final decisions on disposal be made by the full Governing body. Haldane also advocates that disposed artefacts be kept within the public domain, including transferring deaccessioned artefacts to another museum or kept within the institution as 'hands on' collections.

Meyer's unpublished research paper investigating the notion of perpetuity within New Zealand museums provides an interesting overview on how museums in the Wellington region address perpetuity within their collection policies and whether museum theory corresponds to museum practice. Meyers' research concluded that there was a stronger advocacy among museum practitioners for retention over disposal, although all practitioners involved in the research had been involved with or considered deaccessioning in some capacity.

The literature review establishes that there is varying and often divided opinion within the professional museum community on deaccessioning and disposal. While it is generally accepted that deaccessioning is considered a necessary process that contributes towards the successful management of a museum collection, the how and why of deaccessioning is still contestable. Although deaccessioning has been practiced formally and informally within museums in New Zealand and overseas almost since their inception, little research and analysis has been provided on the benefits of deaccessioning collections and the effect that removing objects has on the quality of the overall collection. At present there exist two gaps in deaccession literature. The first concerns whether deaccessioning and disposal of objects actually assists with shaping the quality of a museum's collection. Related to this concern is whether deaccessioning is necessary to the successful manageability of a museum collection and contributes towards museum collections being financially sustainable and better cared for. Secondly little research and information is available on the practicalities of developing and implementing a deaccessioning strategy in a New Zealand museum and how and why the process is being used.

Methodology

In my literature review I point out that deaccessioning is considered a healthy and increasingly necessary aspect of successful museum collections management. However as the literature revealed the process of deaccessioning is often fraught with financial, legal and ethical issues. Due to negative associations and practical difficulties surrounding deaccessioning, museums are often hesitant to deaccession their collections. Additionally, to avoid negative publicity they may be reluctant to be open about their use of the process. While there are a few case studies on overseas museums' use of the process, little literature exists on how and why New Zealand museums deaccession. My dissertation addresses this gap by providing a case study on Museum of Wellington City and Sea's use of deaccessioning within their collection redevelopment.

This dissertation therefore seeks to consider the questions *how* and *why* is the Museum of Wellington using deaccessioning within their collection redevelopment and what are the benefits of this process? In order to address these questions the research methods I used were interviews and analysis of primary documentation and secondary source literature.

Museum of Wellington City and Sea was selected for this research as they have been actively deaccessioning and disposing of objects as part of a wider redevelopment of their collection. The Museum has also been transparent about their use of the process, publishing online reports of deaccessioned objects and redevelopment plans for their collection. This suggested that they were open to discussing not only the benefits that were achieved through the process but would also be open to discuss the challenges and risk associated with the process. For these reasons I decided that MOWCAS was an ideal candidate for an in-depth study analysing the processes and outcomes of deaccessioning.

In the first stage of the research I examined MOWCAS's policy documents, including their collections plan, collections policy and other primary documentation such as internal reports and articles written by staff involved with deaccessioning at the Museum. This provided background on why the Museum was redeveloping their collection and what procedures and frameworks are used to guide deaccessioning and disposal. Along with examining MOWCAS's documents I also reviewed deaccessioning policies and documents provided by institutions such as Museums

Association (UK), American Alliance of Museums (AAM), National Services Te Paraengi and Museums Aotearoa. The policies and documents of these organisations provided a wider understanding of how deaccessioning and disposal should ideally be undertaken within museums.

As my dissertation is both describing and analysing a current museum practice it was important that my research was centred on the experiences and perspectives of staff directly involved with the deaccessioning process. Four of the key staff members involved with deaccessioning at MOWCAS were interviewed for this dissertation. Staff interviewed provided qualitative information and reflections on the various stages of the process.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-standardised open-ended interview format (see appendix 1). The advantage of this method noted by Michael Patton is that the data collected provides an understanding of “how staff and participants view the program, to learn *their* terminology and judgements, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual experiences” (190, 290).

Interviews were important to understanding the practical challenges of deaccessioning collections along with identifying the beneficial outcomes from the perspective of staff directly involved with the process.

An advantage of the semi-standard open-ended interview format was that it allowed for consistent information to be collected from those interviewed. Due to time constraints for data gathering this approach made the best use of time. The downside of this approach identified by Patton, is that it does not allow the interviewer the freedom to pursue an avenue of enquiry that may arise in the interview but was not anticipated when predetermining questions (1990, 286). Due to the varied levels of staff involvement and experiences with the deaccessioning process, it was appropriate to collect more data from some interviewees than others or ask role specific questions. To mitigate the limitations of using standardised questions, I allowed time in the interviews to pursue other lines of enquiry that had arisen which was useful for my research. When it came to analysing the data collected, the interviews were transcribed in full and the responses were categorised into themes.

I recognised that by selecting a medium sized museum with a relatively small staff I was unable to provide anonymity to my research population. In order to alleviate potential concerns from staff being interviewed, where direct quotes have been used, the text was reviewed by the interviewee to ensure the intent and meaning of the quote was accurate. This maintained transparency of the data being used for my research with the research population. I also acknowledged that interpretation of data is informed by my own personal and professional experiences and where possible I was transparent about this when interviewing staff and writing up the research. Notes were also taken throughout and directly after the interview. This is a technique that is recommended by Patton as it allows the interviewer to review the quality of information gathered and highlight areas of ambiguity for follow up (1990, 352).

Due to time constraints I was unable to carry out observations of the deaccessioning process in action as I had originally planned. However, I did visit the Museum's refurbished collection store. This added to my understanding of the practical elements of the process such as current collection storage and working areas. I had also previously seen the collection store prior to refurbishment on a visit unrelated to this research. Because of this previous visit I was able to observe the differences in the storeroom pre and post refurbishment.

A quantitative analysis of data about MOWCAS's collection would have been useful for understanding the impact that deaccessioning has had on their overall collection. Statistical information showing comparative data pre and post deaccessioning about the size of the collection, alignment of the collection to policy and disposal methods utilised by percentage would have greatly contributed to supporting the arguments presented in this dissertation. The decision to not undertake this type of research was due to MOWCAS not having their entire collection registered on their collection management database. This would have meant that any reports generated from MOWCAS's collection management system containing statistical information about the collection would be unreliable and provide an inaccurate view of the collection as a whole.

This research, as required by the University, underwent a Human Ethics Review and was granted ethics approval.

Outline

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter gives information on recommendations and guidelines for deaccessioning that are provided by organisations in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand that are influential in setting standards for best practice within the museum sector. The chapter also traces the history of MOWCAS and outlines policies and procedures for deaccessioning and disposal at the Museum. In the second chapter I focus in on *how* and *why* MOWCAS are deaccessioning as part of their collection redevelopment. The chapter outlines how the deaccessioning process at MOWCAS worked, what were the motivating reasons for deaccessioning along with the challenges and risks of the process. This chapter draws heavily from my interview material to provide an understanding of how the deaccessioning process was experienced by staff. Chapter three addresses the last part of my research question analysing the outcomes of the process. This chapter further explores what benefits can be achieved for the collection and also for the museum through deaccessioning.

Chapter One: Background

The main questions that my research aims to address are: *how and why is MOWCAS using deaccessioning within their collection review and what are the benefits of the process?*

Addressing these questions necessitates an understanding of how the process should, according to best practice recommendations, be used within museums. This chapter therefore will first outline the recommendations for deaccessioning and disposal that are espoused by museum organisations influential in providing measures for best practice. Additionally I will also provide a brief overview of the museum sector in New Zealand and background information about Museum of Wellington City and Sea.

Terminology

The terms deaccessioning and disposal have often been used interchangeably due to misconceptions in the museum sector, public and press about what these words actually mean (Groninger 2011, 388; Museums Association 2006, 11). For this reason it is important that I define the terms deaccessioning and disposal and their use in this dissertation.

Deaccessioning describes the process whereby an accessioned object is formally removed from a museum's permanent collection. It is important to clarify that deaccessioning only refers to the removal of objects that have been accessioned and does not refer to the removal of other kinds of collections that a museum may hold such as props or educational collections. Additionally deaccessioning does not always result in an object being removed from a museum as objects can still be retained by a museum and repurposed for other uses (Davies 2011, 21).

Once an object has been deaccessioned then disposal is the term used to describe the action taken. This is the physical means a museum uses to remove the object from its collection. Popular disposal methods include transfer, destruction, repatriation, sale and return to donor. Dispersal has also been used in place of disposal. The term was used by the National Maritime Museum (UK) within their Collections Reform Project. Dispersal only applies to specific methods of

disposal which the National Maritime Museum defines as the “formal transfer of an item(s) from the Museum's collection into a new home within the public domain. The item(s) may either be placed on long-term loan to the recipient organization or legal title in the item(s) may be transferred to the recipient organization” (Royal Museums Greenwich website). Due to the negative connotations associated with the word disposal, dispersal has been used to describe positively the process that can be beneficial for both the object and the museums involved.

Deaccessioning and Disposal: An Overview

The ethics and recommendations for deaccessioning and disposal are for the most part consistent across countries and between museum member organisations. As I found during the initial research, literature on deaccessioning has mostly concerned deaccessioning and disposal carried out at museums in the United States or United Kingdom. This may be in part to do with the legal restrictions in some European countries such as Italy, France, Spain and Portugal that prohibit disposal by law (Kendall and Steel 2011, 15). The exception to this is the numerous case studies and articles available on the deaccessioning carried out at Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada. Museums and museum organisations in the United Kingdom and United States have been the most the prolific in providing case studies, surveys, discussions, debates and ethical guidelines and recommendations on deaccessioning and disposal. The ethical recommendations provided by organisations such as Museums Association (UK) and American Alliance for Museums are widely adopted into the codes of ethics of museums organisations in other countries and their recommendations are followed by many museums. For this reason I have focused on providing information about the guidelines and ethics for deaccessioning and disposal in these two countries. I will also briefly outline recommendations for deaccessioning and disposal in Australia.

United Kingdom

Arts Council England (ACE) is a government funded body that provides financial assistance and support to museums, libraries and the arts throughout the UK. Additionally ACE administers an

accreditation scheme that encourages museums to achieve standards in how they are run, how they manage their collections and the experience they offer their users. Through participation in the scheme museums demonstrate they have achieved a set of standards which in turn creates confidence and credibility in the museum. This can be especially beneficial for museums when applying for grants and funding.

In regards to collections and particularly disposals, ACE requires museums to meet the following standards in order to receive accreditation:

- Approved acquisition and disposal policy that includes: statement of purpose, overview of current collections, themes and priorities for future collecting, themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal and information about the legal and ethical framework for acquisition and disposal of items
- Primary SPECTRUM² procedures in place in form of documentation and procedural manual that is available for inspection on request (Arts Council England 2011, 10-11)

Failure to meet ACE's Accreditation requirements results in a museum receiving provisional status or losing the status altogether.

The Museums Association (MA) is an independently funded members organisation for UK museums. The Association sets ethical standards within the sector and provides training, professional development and support to its members. Ethical disposal guidelines prepared by Museums Associations Ethics Committee begin with a strong presumption against disposals of any item from a museum's permanent collection. This is due to the understanding that collections are acquired with the expectation they will be retained in perpetuity. However, the MA does recognise that there are circumstances where disposal is an appropriate course of action for a museum to undertake. Most highly regarded of these reasons is transferral to another public institution which can provide greater access, care and context for an item. Additionally MA's guidelines recognise that museums may wish to dispose of deteriorated items, duplicates, substandard or irrelevant collections or return cultural property.

² SPECTRUM is an international standard for museum collection management and documentation developed by the Collections Trust (UK) in 1994. The standard is used by museums in the UK and internationally providing procedures for acquisitions, copyright, risk assessment and loans.

Key recommendations from MA's Code of Ethics include:

- Base decisions to dispose on clear, published criteria as part of the institution's long-term collections policy, approved by the governing body. Ensure transparency and carry out any disposal only, according to unambiguous, generally accepted procedures.
- Openly communicate and document all disposals and the basis on which decisions to dispose were made.
- Give priority to transferring items, preferably by gift to registered *accredited* museums. Consider donating items to other public institutions if it is not possible for another museum to accept them. To maintain confidence in museums wherever possible do not transfer items out of the public domain.
- Demonstrate clearly how the long term local and general public interest is served in circumstances in which disposal may be appropriate and ensure that public trust in museums is upheld.
- Seek the views of stakeholders who have a vested interest in a proposed disposal. (Museums Association 2008, 5).

MA Disposals Toolkit (2008) provides further information to museums about managing and implementing processes for deaccessioning and disposal. One of the significant additions of the 2008 Toolkit is the relaxation of recommendations around financially motivated disposals. Due to the financial pressure on UK museums caused by the recession, MA revised guidelines and acknowledged that under exceptional circumstances financially motivated disposal may occur although they still strongly advocate against it. They also recommend that any money realised from the sale should be solely used to benefit the museum's collection. If museums want to use the proceeds for any other use, then permission is required by MLA (now Arts Council England) as per accreditation rules.

However while ACE and MLA endorse guidelines for deaccessioning and disposal, Katherine Groninger argues that the application of these guidelines in the United Kingdom is not always straightforward. With three quarters of UK museums not members of MA, Groninger suggests this indicates that the "majority of Britain's museums may not participate in, have access to, or be aware of accountability standards including deaccessioning" (2011, 387). Furthermore Groninger (2011) proposes that varying levels of professionalism in the sector and variations in how different types of institutions manage their collections may result in deaccessioning and disposal guidelines and ethics being ignored, misunderstood or overruled.

United States of America

In the United States deaccessioning and disposal is relatively uninhibited. As most museums are set up as nonprofit organisations, as opposed to government controlled, they have the right to deaccession and dispose of their collections under the supervision of their governing board.

Malaro clarifies this point by explaining that “any museum organised as a nonprofit has an inherent right to deaccession material unless its charter specifically limits this right” (1997, 333).

Organisations such as American Alliance of Museums (AAM) (formally American Association of Museums) and Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) regulate deaccessioning and disposal undertaken at their member organisations. AAMD provides support to its members so that they can increase their contribution to society. They do this through “maintaining the highest standards of professional practice, serving as forum for the exchange of information and ideas, acting as an advocate for its member art museums, and being a leader in shaping public discourse about the arts community and the role of art in society” (AAMD website). Similarly AAM supports the museum community by developing standards and best practices, providing resources and career development and as an advocate for museums.

AAMD have clear requirements and provisions concerning deaccessioning for its member museums.

- Member museums should not capitalise or collateralise collections or recognise as revenue the value of donated works.
- Thorough research is provided to the museums Board of Trustees on provenance, expression of donor intent, scholarly evaluation and relevance to the existing collection and future collection goals.
- Publication on website within a reasonable time of works that have been deaccessioned and disposed of.
- Museums should notify the donor where practical and when the work is by a living artist, consideration must be given to notifying the artist (AAMD 2010).

If a member museum violates one or more of the provisions of AAMD’s deaccessioning policy, this may result in censure, sanction or expulsion from the Association (2010, 8).

AAM's recommendations and policies for deaccessioning are similar, their resources and policies are accessible online to their members only. However Maloro provides a summary of the code of ethics propagated by AAM which are:

- Museums should have a public statement about their policy on deaccessioning.
- When considering disposal methods, the museum should consider the interests of the public that it serves.
- The governing board bears the ultimate responsibility for deaccessioning decisions, however recommendations of curatorial staff should be considered with great weight (Maloro 1997, 333).

Australia

The museum sector in Australia is diverse and comprised of federal, state or territory funded museums, museums operating as not for profit bodies, university and governmental museums and volunteer managed organisations. Museums Australia is the national organisation that represents and promotes the museum sector in Australia. The organisation is non-profit and non-government and serves to promote “museum sector development, articulates ethical standards, facilitates training, advances knowledge, addresses issues, and raises public awareness through its national and international networks” (Museums Australia website). Museums Australia does not offer an accreditation scheme and according to the Collections Council Australia website there is no plan to implement a nationwide scheme. However accreditation schemes are delivered at state level in some Australian states through organisations such as Museums Australia Victoria and History Trust of South Australia. While Museums Australia does not offer a national accreditation scheme, it does promote the standards developed by the National Standards Taskforce.

The National Standards (2011) were developed in collaboration with representative museum organisations in each Australian state. The National Standards concerned with deaccessioning are:

- The collection policy and procedures explain procedures and criteria with regard to: acquisitions, deaccessioning and disposal.
- Decisions about acquisitions, deaccessioning and care of the collection are informed by significance assessments.
- The museum knows the significance of its collection (2011, 56-57).

The National Standards provide no further recommendations for how objects are deaccessioned or disposed of. There is further reference in their glossary section that notes “when deaccessioning objects, museums must ensure that all legal requirements are met and that the objects are made ready for disposal in an appropriate and ethical way”. For disposals they “must occur in accordance with the procedures and conditions outlined in the deaccession policy” (2011, 82-83). This suggests it is the responsibility of individual museums in Australia or their governing bodies to establish guidelines and policies for how deaccessioning and disposal is undertaken within their organisations.

When Collections Council of Australia (CCA) was closed in 2010, the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport, became the custodian of an important resource that had been developed by the CCA that has been widely used to guide accessioning and deaccessioning frameworks. This resource is the publication *Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections* (2009). The significance framework developed by CCA has been influential on museums within and outside Australia as it provides an adaptable method for determining significance in collections. Through CCA’s assessment process knowledge is built about an object from a variety of perspectives. CCA recommend that in order to gain the most value out of the process a transparent and collaborative approach to assessments is recommended as this allows organisations to explore multiple meanings and values for objects and to document them in the assessment (2009, 10).

New Zealand

For a country with a relatively small population, New Zealand has a lot of museums and galleries. Ranging in size and type there are approximately 471 spread throughout the country. Ninety percent of these institutions are micro-sized and employ no permanent full time staff. The remainder comprise a mixture of small to large regional museums and galleries along with one national museum. Currently 1,625 people are estimated to work in the sector with a further 1,946 people working for museums in a voluntary capacity (Museums Aotearoa 2012)

In Museums Aotearoa's recent sector survey (2012) the majority of museums that responded reported having an acquisitions, collection management and deaccessioning policy. One key finding was that museums were more likely to have their collections manually documented than electronically recorded, with collections mainly being catalogued to inventory level only. Concerns expressed by respondents about their collections included "lack of funding and resourcing to undertake the appropriate care and management of collections, lack of skilled and experienced staff to care for collections, workload pressures and competing priorities that hinder the care, maintenance and management of collections" (McCauley 2013, 2). These findings support McCarthy's description of the sector as "fragmented and relatively unprofessionalised" (2011, 18).

In New Zealand, deaccessioning is largely unrestricted with museums setting their own procedures for deaccessioning and disposal. If applicable, a museum's governing body may also have deaccessioning regulations and policies in place. This means that if a museum has clear legal title and there are no restrictions placed on an object when it enters into a collection, they are entitled to deaccession and dispose providing they do so within the policies and procedures of their own institution and governing body. New Zealand's relatively unprofessionalised and certainly under-resourced museum sector, creates the risk of inappropriate deaccessioning or disposal of collection items. Furthermore with no accreditation scheme currently in place in New Zealand, museums may suffer no consequences for unethical or inappropriate deaccessioning and disposal decisions.

There are two external organisations in New Zealand where museums may be guided about deaccessioning and disposal - Museums Aotearoa and National Services Te Paerangi (National Services).

National Services works in partnership with museums, galleries and iwi (tribes) across New Zealand. Operated out of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), National Services provide a range of practical and strategic programmes aimed at strengthening the sector (Te Papa website). National Services have produced a number of guides intended to provide information on best practice care and management of museums and their collections. The guides

are publically available through their website. Their resource guide *Developing your collection* (2003) provides recommendations on how museums should create a framework for making acquisition and deaccessioning decisions. Recommendations in the guide are similar to those provided by MA, AAMD and AAM.

Key recommendations from the resource guide include:

- Those responsible for accessioning should be involved with deaccessioning.
- Consultation with as wide group of people as possible including original donors, descendents of donors.
- Retention of disposed object in the public domain by transfer to another museum or public institution (National Services Te Paerangi, 2003).

The guide also warns that deaccessioning and disposal requires a high level of sensitivity especially when it relates to bequests and donations and advocates an open approach to deaccessioning and accountability within the museum's community.

National Services runs a voluntary standards scheme for museums in New Zealand. This involves a self and peer review process to measure performance against accepted museum best practice.

National Services list the benefits of the scheme as:

- Guidance in meeting approved standards in key areas of museum services.
- Confidence among actual and potential donors and lenders that the museum they select is a suitable organisation to care for their objects, taonga or collections.
- Reassurance among actual and potential funders and sponsors that a museum manages its resources responsibly.
- Knowledge on behalf of a museum personnel that they are doing a good job and know where improvements need to be made (Te Papa website).

In regards to deaccessioning museums are required to fill out a self review declaration confirming if they have an acquisition and deaccessioning policy. While the scheme is useful for museums to understand what best practice should look like, it is questionable whether it carries the same weight as the accreditation schemes offered by organisations such as the UK Museums Association.

On their website, Museums Aotearoa is described as “New Zealand's independent peak professional organisation for museums and those who work in, or have an interest in, museums” (Museums Aotearoa website). Their mission is to raise the profile and performance of museums and galleries in New Zealand. Membership of Museums Aotearoa is voluntary and open to museums that subscribe to and act in accordance with their Code of Ethics (2003). The word deaccessioning is not used in Museums Aotearoa’s Code of Ethics, however there are ethical guidelines provided for disposals.

In regards to disposal, Museums Aotearoa’s Code of Ethics can be summarised as promulgating the following rules:

- There is a strong presumption that once objects are acquired they will be retained in perpetuity. The collecting objects of the museum must be stated clearly including policies for collections acquisitions, access, loans and disposal.
- No objects should be disposed of without careful consideration under the disposal policy, including seeking the view of donors. Objects should be offered first by gift, exchange or private sale to other museums before any other disposal means are considered (2003, 3-4).

According to the rules of Museums Aotearoa any member can be expelled by the Museums Aotearoa Board if they are found to act inconsistently with the Code of Ethics. Museums Aotearoa is currently assessing their Code of Ethics so these rules may be subject to change.

National Services and Museums Aotearoa ethics and guidelines for deaccessioning and disposal are a pastiche of recommendations appropriated from overseas organisations such as Museums Association and American Alliance of Museums. Arguably there are potential issues when adopting guidelines that have been developed with another situation in mind as these may not be appropriate within a New Zealand context. Most New Zealand museums are small and very few can provide the resources necessary to adequately care for and store objects. This may lead to pressure being placed on some of the larger and public museums to accept deaccessioned objects and in turn not resolve the larger issues that deaccessioning can address such as focusing collections or removing objects that should not have been acquired into public ownership in the first place.

History of Museum of Wellington City and Sea

Guidelines for deaccessioning are best developed within the context in which they will be recommended. How and why a museum deaccessions will be unique to their situation. Some museums will never have the need to deaccession and for others deaccessioning will be driven by necessity and not choice. For this reason it is important that I provide a brief history and profile of Museum of Wellington City and Sea in order to identify what makes their situation different to other museums that may be deaccessioning.

In April 1972 Wellington City Harbour Board (Harbour Board) established and opened the Wellington Maritime Museum of the Wellington Harbour Board. Operating since 1880, the Harbour Board was responsible for the management of the city's harbour and facilities. Displaying the Harbour Board's collection of maritime artefacts and archives, the Maritime Museum had its origins in a single room in the Harbour Board's Bond Store Building. Following a decline in shipping activity and a restructure in local government, Wellington City Harbour Board was disbanded in 1989. Prior to disbanding, the Harbour Board established the Maritime Museum Trust (MMT) to manage the Maritime Museum. The MMT would operate the Museum up until 1996, however funding shortfalls resulted in MMT handing over the management of the Museum along with its collection to Wellington Museums Trust.

Once the Maritime Museum came under Wellington Museums Trust, Wellington City Council contributed \$7 million of the \$12 million required for upgrading and improving the Museum. This included providing earthquake strengthening to the Museum building. As part of the agreement to fund improvements, the Council requested that the Museum's mission be expanded to cover Wellington's cultural and social history. The Museum's new mission meant that the Museum could be marketed to appeal to a wider audience that would in turn increase visitation to the Museum. To reflect the change in focus as well as acknowledge its origins as a Maritime Museum, the Museum underwent a name change and became Museum of Wellington City and Sea.

MOWCAS is part of Museums Wellington, a group that also includes Wellington's Colonial Museum and the Cable Car Museum. Museums Wellington is operated and managed by Wellington Museums Trust (Trust). Along with Museums Wellington the Trust also oversees City Gallery Wellington, Capital E, Carter Observatory and New Zealand Cricket Museum (in partnership with New Zealand Cricket Museum). The Trust's principal funder is Wellington City Council who founded the Trust in 1995 to develop "museum and cultural activities within the city for the benefit of Wellington residents and the wider community" (WMT website). The Trust has five trustees and a senior management team comprising of the Chief Executive, Director Capital E, Director City Gallery Wellington and Director Museums Wellington.

MOWCAS is centrally located on the waterfront of New Zealand's capital city. The Museum has a range of permanent and temporary exhibitions focused on Wellington's cultural, social and maritime history. Permanent exhibitions include the exhibition on the 1968 Wahine ferry disaster, 101 stories of 20th Century Wellington life and the Māori myths and legends show, *A Millennium Ago*. More recently the Museum was awarded a Diversity Award from the Human Rights Commission for their exhibition *Death and Diversity* (2011-2012) and accompanying events and public programmes. The exhibition which explored the death customs and rituals of various ethnic communities living in Wellington is just one example of many that displays the Museum's commitment to telling the stories and histories of Wellington's various communities.

The Museum currently attracts approximately 90,000 local, national and international visitors per year (WMT 2012a, 31). Entrance to the Museum is free with funding received through sponsorship and revenue generating activities such as tours, children's birthday parties, venue hire and the Museum Shop. Excluding hosts, Museums Wellington currently employs approximately 18 permanent staff. Additionally MOWCAS receives assistance from a dedicated team of volunteers who help registering and researching the Museum's permanent collection.

The Museum's collection not on display is housed off site in a collection store located just outside Wellington city centre at Ngauranga Gorge. Management and care of the collection is overseen by a Collection Manager, Registrar and the Exhibitions and Collection Technician, with some research and registration assistance from volunteers. The collection store has recently

undergone a much needed refurbishment to bring it up to current standards. Prior to the refurbishment the Trust had commissioned a report which concluded that the “conditions in the store were detrimental to the care of the collections and placed them at risk”. An Occupational Health and Safety report had also found the “working conditions as being unacceptable, noting the extremes in seasonal temperatures” (WMT 2009, 15).

As of 2007 the collection contained approximately 67 000 objects with 90-95 percent of these being maritime focused (Mason 2007, 6). The collection includes ship models, maritime ephemera, photographs, boats and books, along with objects related to Wellington or maritime history. Objects are registered on the Museum’s collection database Vernon CMS which is used to manage and record information about the objects in the collection. However, as electronic registration is ongoing at the Museum, there is still a mixture of manual (paper) and electronic records for objects.

MOWCAS’s Current Focus on deaccessioning

Guidelines and processes for deaccessioning are outlined in MOWCAS’s Collection Policy (2009), Collection Management Procedures (2009) and Collection Plan. The Collection Policy stipulates Wellington Museums Trust’s policies concerning collections including delegation of authority, custody and ownership, scope of the collection, ethics, and limitations on collecting, access, deaccessioning and disposal. The Collection Management Procedures documents the systems and processes that are used by Museums Wellington for acquisitions, deaccessions, disposals, conservation, storage, security, disaster planning and insurance. The Collection Plan provides a framework for how the collection will be developed over a period of time and includes priorities for programs of work.

The strategies outlined in Museums Wellington’s 2010-12 Collection Plan include setting targets for physical and virtual access to the collections, optimising research opportunities on the collection and disseminating information about the collection through various publishing channels.

At present future development of the collection is focused on collecting under the two themes of:

- Settlement of Wellington, and
- History of Wellington including its social, cultural and economic development. (2009b, 24)

Within the Collection Policy deaccessioning is part of the Museum's collection strategy and the processes undertaken to deaccession and dispose of objects are governed by the Trust's Collection Management Procedures (2009b, 25).

Within the Trust's Collection Management Procedures an item can be considered for deaccessioning under the following reasons:

1. The item does not fall within the scope of the collections as specified in section 5 of the Collections Policy *Criteria governing future collection development or Collections Plan*.
2. The item has no current or likely future potential in advancing the Trust's mission through contribution to research, display or education.
3. The item is a duplicate, or otherwise unnecessary to the collections.
4. The item has deteriorated irreversibly.
5. Retention of the item could endanger other items in the collections.
6. The item has not been legitimately acquired.
7. The item is proven to be a forgery or fake.
8. The Trust is unable to care for the item to the appropriate level. (2009a, 28)

As stated within the Collection Policy any member of the curatorial or collections team can recommend an object to be deaccessioned. To be deaccessioned the following procedures apply:

1. An item must meet at least one of the criteria for deaccessioning.
2. The Collections record including any relevant documents on the items should be checked for any restrictions on deaccessioning.
3. If there are no restrictions, then the matter shall be referred to the Chief Executive, accompanied by a report recommending deaccessioning, with full documentation.
4. Once full deaccessioning approval and documentation have been completed, the Chief Executive shall approve the means of disposal.
5. A full record of the item including photographs shall be retained by the Trust. (2009a, 28)

MOWCAS's Collection Plan acknowledges that objects remain the most important reason that people visit museums. However it also stresses that the new museum paradigm calls for "collections to be used to tell a story and objects displayed merely as curios of the past with little or no information or context is no longer acceptable museological practice" (2010, 15). This

approach is indicative of what Weil calls the ‘de-centering’ of the collection which values objects that can be utilised “for the achievement of a larger end and simply one among a number of resources that the museum can employ to carry out its services to the public” (2004, 289). MOWCAS’ collection serves a defined purpose within the Museum. Objects are displayed as a means to narrate the cultural, social and maritime history of Wellington.

Interview Participants

I interviewed four key staff members involved with the deaccessioning process at MOWCAS and visited the Museum’s Collection Store at Ngauranga Gorge. These staff were:

Brett Mason who has been the Director of Museum of Wellington City and Sea for six-and-a-half years and Director of Museums Wellington for three years. Prior to taking on the Director position, Mason was the Programming and Marketing Manager at the Museum. Mason has been involved with various aspects of the deaccessioning process and collection redevelopment, including writing the Collection Policy and Collection Procedures, development of the Collection Plan including development of the new collection store. Along with this Mason was also one of the people involved with reviewing and deciding which collections would be deaccessioned and disposed of.

Paul Thompson is the Head of Learning, Programming, Experience and Content as well as the Deputy Director at the Museum. He is responsible for the content of exhibitions, public programmes and education. Formerly Thompson also held the position of Director of Museum of Wellington City and Sea. Thompson’s involvement with the deaccessioning process has been reviewing objects, along with Mason and David Waller for deaccessioning that fall outside the Museum’s Collecting Policy. Thompson adds a historical and accessibility perspective to this process.

David Waller is the Collections and Exhibitions Manager. Prior to appointment in this role he was previously seconded to the role of Collection Manager for 18 months overseeing the Collection Store refurbishment. Waller is responsible for managing the Wellington Museum

Trust's collections alongside the Exhibitions and Collections Assistant and Registrar. Waller's involvement with the deaccessioning process has been as one of the key people, along with Mason and Thompson, to review objects for deaccessioning.

Joe Bartley is the Exhibitions and Collections Assistant. Bartley works alongside Waller to manage Wellington Museum Trust's exhibitions and has over the past one-and-a-half years been assisting with the redevelopment of the Museum and Collection Store. Bartley has been involved in the more practical aspects of the deaccessioning process including packing, organising and processing collections as well as creating inventory lists.

Chapter Two: Case Study Findings

In the last chapter I provided background information on deaccessioning and the museum used in the case study. Here I discuss the findings of the interviews conducted with four key staff members from MOWCAS directly involved with the deaccessioning process at the Museum. The chapter provides an outline of the motivating factors that led the Museum to assess collections for deaccessioning as well as an overview of how the deaccessioning process worked. It also examines the challenges that have arisen through the process and risks that staff identified.

Motivating Factors

Museums deaccession and dispose of objects for a variety of reasons. At MOWCAS there have been a number of factors that has led the Museum to review their collection and deaccession and dispose of objects. During the interviews staff identified motivating factors as the Museum's change in focus which resulted in collections falling outside the Museum's current collection policy and collecting scope, over-representation of maritime objects, focusing the collection for display rather than research, an inability to care for certain types of objects and the refurbishment of the Collection Store.

When Wellington Museums Trust took control of the Maritime Museum in 1996 the Museum's focus was changed from maritime history to the social, maritime and cultural history of Wellington. This shift in focus has resulted in a divergence between the collection that was inherited by the Trust and the current missions of three Museums operated by Museums Wellington. The divergence is mentioned in WMT 2009 Collections and Research Plan - Matter for Discussion, with the collection being described as "overwhelmingly focused on maritime history" while the Trust's museums have a much broader focus of telling the "social and cultural history" of the Wellington Region (2010, 16). The plan also acknowledges that it will be "some years before this policy objective is reflected in the collections" (2010, 16). Paul Thompson³ explained that deaccessioning has been undertaken at MOWCAS in order to "improve the

³ Interview with MOWCAS were all conducted in February 2013. Hereafter all interviews are listed in the references.

collection and make it fit with the Museum's mission". David Waller also mentioned alignment of the policy behind the decision to deaccession along with creating a stronger collection with a good focus. As part of the redevelopment process Waller adds that Museum staff have also been "systematically auditing our collection so we know what we have got and what we don't have. Where the holes are".

When asked what the main reason to deaccession was, Mason mentioned objects falling outside the collection policy. He also pointed out that the collection has little social history content and maritime objects are heavily represented with 90-95 percent of objects in the collection being connected to maritime. The collection contains objects which extend to national and international maritime history. These were acquired during the time that the Museum was operated as the Maritime Museum. As Thompson points out "when the Museum was a Maritime Museum its mission was to become the Southern Hemisphere's foremost maritime research institution. They collected basically anything to do with maritime". With the collections presently being focused on objects connected to Wellington's social and maritime history, deaccessioning has mainly involved removing maritime objects that are connected to national and international maritime history. Staff insisted that the focus of deaccessioning is not to deaccession *all* the maritime objects in the collection, as they will retain, where they can, the objects which have significance to the Wellington region.

At present the Trust's collections are utilised in both temporary and permanent exhibitions at the various museums operated by Wellington Museums Trust. Along with a new mission and scope for future collecting, WMT have implemented a plan that sets strategies for how the collection will be managed and developed. Targets have also been set for how the collection is utilised presently and into the future. A clear priority of the plan is to develop the collection for exhibition and display. As stated in the WMT 2009-12 Collection Plan:

The collections focus will be developed through a Collections Plan that considers present and future exhibition activities across the Trust. The Collections Plan will detail quality, relevance, usefulness and appeal to our communities of interest and be used to guide decision making particularly in accepting new items into the collections (2009c 14).

The dominance of maritime objects in the collection has made it problematic for MOWCAS staff to utilise when drawing for exhibitions. As Joe Bartley notes “the collection has not been very strong for curators of the Museum to lean on when they are coming up with their exhibitions because they are wanting items with a regional focus and we have got [a] national and international maritime focus”. The result of this, as recorded in 2010 Collection Plan Matter for Discussion is that the “divergence between the collections and the focus of our museums means that to create exhibitions, including those planned as part of the Museum of Wellington City and Sea refreshment, will mean borrowing from other institutions or private lenders” (2010, 16). In addition as part of the collection redevelopment, staff mentioned that they are also working towards a goal of getting 90 percent of the collection on either physical or digital display. With regard to this goal, Waller stated that “there is no point for us to hold onto to anything that we are not going to display”. Having more of the collection available for display will also link back in to the Trust’s goal of exploiting opportunities for research and to increase knowledge when objects are on display (2010, 16).

To a lesser extent improved collection care, storage and reduction in collection costs are mentioned by staff as reasons for deaccessioning collections at MOWCAS. It was only after further questioning about resourcing and storage that staff conceded that increased storage space and reduced overall collection costs would be an outcome. This suggests that staff primarily viewed the deaccessioning as being motivated by curatorial reasons driven by the change in focus of the Museum and the divergence between the collection and the Museum’s current collection goals and scope. Increased storage and reduced collection costs were only viewed by staff as outcomes of the process rather than motivating factors.

However, a clear priority given in the Wellington Museum Trust’s 2009-2012 Collection Plan indicates that the review of collections which led to items being deaccessioned was additionally motivated by a need to provide best practice care for the collections. Under the Trust’s three year plan the primary focus was preparing the Trust’s heritage collections to be moved to fit-for-purpose storage. Within this plan priority is assigned to reviewing collections with the “objective of ensuring that collection items which are relocated fit the Trust’s Collection Policy”. Where items did not meet the requirements of the Collection Policy they would be “de-accession[ed] and disposed of in accordance with the Policy” (2009c, 14). While the Collection Plan implies that

deaccessioning is an outcome of the decision to relocate the Trust's collection, Mason suggests that it was conversely the decision to deaccession that assisted the Museum to get the funding needed for the collection store refurbishment. "People said you are doing that therefore you deserve to be able to get this. That was like the carrot to get us over the line in some ways". Along with improved collection care, Mason admits there will be a cost benefit to deaccessioning as the Museum "would have a reduced number of collection items to look after so the ongoing cost of conservation and storage would ultimately be reduced". Waller further adds that while the focus of deaccessioning at MOWCAS was not to "free up storage space", a flow on effect of deaccessioning will result in more storage space which "will also mean that we will have space to build our collection".

The deaccessioning process has also involved deaccessioning types of objects for which the Museum does not have the resources available to provide best practice care and storage. The aim is to relocate these objects to institutions that can provide the storage and care required. An example of this is the Museum's photography collection. At present, the Museum does not have cool storage to house glass plate and film negatives and as Waller states this "informed the decision to transfer the negatives with a Wellington focus to Wellington City Archives who had purpose built cold stores".

Process

In this next section I provide an outline of the deaccessioning and disposal process at MOWCAS. This process only relates to the objects being reviewed for deaccessioning as part of the collection redevelopment. Details about the various steps of the process along with the examples given have been gathered from information provided by staff during the interviews.

The starting point for deaccessioning at MOWCAS was the establishment of a Collection Policy and Procedures along with a Collection Plan to govern the scope and management of the collection. Once implemented, the next step was to review the collection and identify objects for potential deaccessioning. Mason explains the review as a multi-step process. Initially collection volunteers reviewed the collection, followed by the Collection Manager and Collections

Assistant. Each of these teams earmarked items deemed to sit outside the Collection Policy and designated objects as potential deaccessions. Then members of the curatorial and collection teams physically examined the collections earmarked for deaccessioning. The three key people involved at this stage were Mason, Waller and Thompson. The Collection Manager prior to Waller, former Registrars and the collection volunteers had also assisted with this stage of the process.

How did these sessions work? Working off a spreadsheet containing basic information on the objects, staff evaluated those that were marked as potential deaccessions. The evaluations involved reviewing the object's significance to Wellington and its relevance to the Museum's Collection Policy. As Mason explains we "would then have a conversation around that [relevance to collection policy], look at what we were told, have a look at the item out of our own knowledge [perspective], what we knew about it". A staff member would annotate on the spreadsheet any decisions made about the object. Mason noted that initial reviews showed insufficient basic information in the spreadsheets to evaluate an object and more information was required to carry out the assessments. Objects which required further research were put aside until staff had the time to investigate them further. When deaccessioning due to falling out of the scope of the collection, a majority consensus was required by Waller, Thompson and Mason. This is not the process for objects removed for other reasons such as deterioration. In these instances the deaccessioning only requires sign off from the Director if the object is valued under \$500.

There was a certain amount of flexibility within the process that allowed staff to tackle some of the collections being reviewed differently. An example of this was the photography and periodical collections. Staff decided to review these collections as whole as it would have been impractical to evaluate each individual item because of the volume of material in these collections. External maritime experts were also brought in to help with reviewing these collections.

Once the decision was made to deaccession an object, staff would refer back to the documentation to check if the Museum had clear ownership and if there were any restrictions to deaccessioning the object. Deaccessioning decisions were recorded either on the Museum's

collection management database Vernon or in the Museum's physical accession records, depending on how the collection had been registered. As Bartley pointed out, the digital database emphasised the individual object which was useful, however when it came to the bulk collections, such as the photographs and periodicals, these had not all been previously recorded on Vernon. Staff also filled out Wellington Museums Trust's Collections De-accession and Disposal Authorisation form. On the form staff annotated the reason an object was to be deaccessioned, the method of disposal, and if the object was transferred, to whom and where the object had gone. Sign off of the form was required from the Museums Wellington Director, and for objects valued over NZ \$500, the CEO of WMT and Board. Written consent is also required from Wellington City Council for any deaccessions with a value over \$500.

Once an object had been deaccessioned, the final stage of the process is deciding the best means of disposal. The Museum has primarily disposed of objects through transfer to other New Zealand museums, libraries and archives but they have also disposed of objects through sale, destruction or repurposed objects for other uses within the Museum, such as props or educational tools. Where possible, the Museum also aimed to return objects to the original donors or donor's family. In instances where donors did not want an object returned, the Museum negotiated with the donor to transfer objects to other public institutions in New Zealand. Mason advised that selecting the disposal method came back to the object's significance and condition. There were objects that had deteriorated so that their condition meant that disposal by destruction was the only option.

When disposing of an object by transfer, Mason stated it was a matter of questioning "if this doesn't fit for us, who does it fit to? and then knowing how other people collect". The bulk of the photography collection was transferred to Voyager⁴ (New Zealand Maritime Museum) in Auckland. Photographs that were identified as being connected to Wellington were transferred to Wellington City Archives who currently hold the Wellington Harbour Board archives. The decision to transfer the majority of this collection to Voyager was influenced by Voyager agreeing to take the whole collection. Mason had earlier contacted other New Zealand museums

⁴ Voyager is the National Maritime Museum of New Zealand. The museum collects and displays objects related to regional, national and general maritime interests. Operating since August 1993, the Museum is run by the New Zealand National Maritime Museum Trust Board and is located in Auckland City Centre.

and organisations about the collection, but few were prepared to take the whole collection; “they wanted specific things...we were trying to...hold together as much as possible”.

Framework for Decisions

When it came to creating an intellectual or significance framework for assessing objects, Mason stated that the Museum had applied ideas from CCA’s (CCA) guide Significance 2.0 (2009). In CCA’s guide significance is defined as a way of “telling compelling stories about items and collections” as well as the “historic, artistic, scientific and social or spiritual values that items and collections have for past, present and future generations” (Russell and Winkworth 2009, 10).

While some museums such as Glenbow Museum, Canada, and Imperial War Museum, London, used a grading or tiered system for evaluating collections, MOWCAS adopted a qualitative approach. This meant that rather than numbering or grading collections based on a set of criteria, MOWCAS staff discussed the significance of the objects to Wellington and explored ideas for how they could tell a Wellington story. Mason thought that they initially had used a grading system but had dropped this in favour of a qualitative approach. Mason did not elaborate on why they did not continue with the grading system however my instinct is that the qualitative approach provided flexibility and enabled the assessments to be carried out more quickly. The advantage of using a grading or tiered system for assessing significance is that the method ensures that all assessments are carried out with consistency. This approach also provides transparency about deaccessioning decisions, thus preventing accusations that decisions are made subjectively. MOWCAS’s decision not to use this approach could result in future questions being raised about why decisions were made to retain or remove objects as their qualitative approach is less systematic. Mason describes an example of how the significance framework worked when they assessed the model ship collection.

We always took it from the perspective of: how does this ship help us tell the story of Wellington as a ship model rather than an object...If it didn’t help us tell the story because typically it didn’t have any provenance to Wellington either by maker, by the ship ever visiting Wellington, it wasn’t a ship that serviced Wellington in any form or that its condition was so poor that it didn’t have any value anymore, or it was going to cost so much to bring it up to a certain state, applying the policy in that sense, that it didn’t bear

any greater cost than its value in the sense than what it could give back to the Museum or give back to display.

Thompson commented that when assessing an object for deaccessioning at MOWCAS it was about examining the “strengths, weaknesses of the collection, the possible uses of the collection, the condition of the collection” in order to get a focused view of the object.

Challenges, Risks and Solutions

There are many risks and challenges associated with the deaccessioning process, which are often directly associated with the objects being deaccessioned or the disposal method. A key line of enquiry of the interviews was establishing what challenges staff had encountered during the process and how they worked through these.

Staff reported poor documentation and other substandard aspects of previous museum practices at MOWCAS and its predecessors as being problematic for the deaccessioning process. An example of this mentioned by Mason are objects registered as ‘found in the collection’. This registration is used when a museum acquires an object that is found in their collection which they have been unable to reconcile with acquisition documentation despite their best efforts (Buck and Gilmore 2007, 7). Mason discovered that this has not always been the case at MOWCAS. As he remarks there is “a huge amount of material that is numbered as found in the museum and the further you dig into it the more you realise that numbering is a lazy way of saying, ‘I can’t be bothered looking up where it came from’”. This affected the ability of staff in some instances to make informed deaccessioning decisions. Mason reported that he felt disappointed in the instances where he believed that the correct processes had been followed and later discovered that they were not. As he comments “[there is] a bit of guilt around that because it means that you haven’t necessarily followed through as hard as you could have”. Due to the scale and speed of what the Museum was trying to achieve he acknowledged that this did not always “allow this to happen to the best”.

Poor database management in the past as well as previous misunderstandings about how objects should be registered have also made it sometimes difficult for staff to understand the connection between objects in the collection. As Mason points out “quite often what we found is that when you have taken one piece you didn’t realise how it fitted into the whole puzzle of one person’s collection or one person’s donation”. This was found to be the case with a collection of books deaccessioned by the Museum which staff later discovered were part of a collection donated by former Dominion Museum director Dr. R A Falla⁵. The association was not easily discernible on Vernon which meant that by the time the connection was realised, MOWCAS had already disposed of a number of the books through transfer, sale and destruction.

Staff identified a potential high risk with the process of deaccessioning objects when objects were later deemed to have a greater historic, display or research value than first believed. For this reason research is an important part of their deaccessioning process. This has been shown by a number of examples at MOWCAS where further research undertaken by Museum staff illuminated and supported deaccessioning decisions. One of these is the Worser Bay Surf Club boat that has now been deaccessioned from the collection and disposed of through transfer to Wellington Zoo. Research involved questioning a previous held assumption about the significance of the boat to the *Wahine* Disaster.⁶ Waller explained that attached to the boat was a note that stated “could have been used in the *Wahine* disaster”. Part of the process for staff when considering this object for deaccessioning was to investigate what the ‘could have been’ meant. Research involved contacting the Worser Bay Surf Club to identify the boat and tracking down people who had been involved with the *Wahine* disaster rescue. Research conducted by staff was instrumental in establishing that the boat had *not* been used in the rescue and did not hold any significance to the part of Wellington’s history that was originally assumed. Due to this

⁵ Dr. Robert Alexander Falla was the director of the Dominion Museum (now Te Papa) from 1947-1966. Falla was passionate about Antarctica and conservation and but also had interests in marine life, the history of shipping, the subantarctic islands, and ornithology. During his career Falla also served as president of various scientific and scholarly bodies which included the Royal Society of New Zealand, Auckland and Wellington Zoological Societies, the New Zealand Ecological Society, the New Zealand Geographical Society, the New Zealand Ship and Marine Society, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, and the Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand (Te Ara website).

⁶ On 10 April 1968 the ferry *Wahine*, carrying passengers from Lyttelton to Wellington, succumbed to stormy seas and foundered in Wellington harbour. Fifty one people lost their lives in the disaster. MOWCAS have a permanent exhibition about the disaster which also serves as a memorial to those who lost their lives. Each year MOWCAS also holds a commemoration service to remember the maritime tragedy.

background research the Museum could safely state that the boat did not fit within the Museum's Collection Policy, and could deaccession and dispose of it accordingly.

MOWCAS has utilised collection volunteers, students, external experts and maritime historians to assist with research. Recognising that the Museum did not always have the internal expertise available, Mason comments that they “worked from an idea of trying to fill in the gaps of what our knowledge was against what knowledge we needed to know”. The collection volunteers have been a valuable internal resource for the Museum and Mason says that they would often go to them to ask “how an item fitted into the overall understanding of the maritime aspect of the collection”. The Museum also brought in external experts to evaluate the Wellington Harbour Board photography and periodical collections. Significant background work was also put into researching and understanding these collections, including seeking advice on the value of keeping them together or splitting them up.

In instances where staff have been unable to source information on objects or have not had the time to conduct the research required, they have put aside the objects for further research. As Waller explains, “If there are any question marks we do more research”. Putting deaccessioning decisions on hold elongates the process and means that MOWCAS will be working on deaccessioning collections for some time into the future.

The time consuming nature of deaccessioning and disposing of objects appropriately will be an ongoing practical challenge for MOWCAS. Staff have spent considerable time inventorying and recording information on the objects being deaccessioned. As Bartley comments:

It takes a lot of manpower to inventory stuff that is going out...there were pallets of periodicals that needed to get all individual numbers that are written on them so that we have got a record of exactly every single periodical that has gone. That is written down and there is sheets and sheets of these.

Motivating staff to continue through this process has also been challenging, as Waller adds that the collection volunteers who helped with the periodicals “got thoroughly sick of the whole project”.

The deaccessioning process has also increased staff workload in areas that were not anticipated. As Bartley explains:

Just other things that you wouldn't expect. Like someone came out and just wanted to see their four items that they had donated in 1999 just to make sure that we still had them. He just came out for a little bit and left and it's the little things like that because they have heard through the grapevine that there is a fire sale down the road they better go and check on their stuff. It does create more work for yourself by doing projects like this.

While the Museum has managed to deaccession a large number of objects, Mason claims that the biggest issue has been the disposal and he had underestimated the time it takes to “dispose of something and dispose of it correctly”. For this reason, the Museum is still currently storing objects that have been deaccessioned while they work through finding the best disposal method or home for these collections.

Collecting has long been shaped and affected by the personal biases and tastes of individuals working within museums. The same subjectivity that can guide collecting may also influence decisions to remove an object or retain it in the collection. In responding to what he had learnt through the process, Mason said that he believed that the “subjective element in choosing things can quickly be put in place if you have got the policy behind you to substantiate a decision. Unless you have got that policy substantiating it you soon end up with a collection that is idiosyncratic”. Additionally Mason and Thompson believed that having a consensus process that involved decisions being made by more than one person alleviated the risk of deaccessioning decisions based on personal biases. As Mason explains “the consensus making process that we have gone with, when an item is being deaccessioned we don't all have to agree, one person can strongly disagree with it but there needs to be a majority perspective on it. And that you don't need to make a decision then, you can come back and revisit it and go okay are you still arguing for this and why are you still arguing for this and let them do the work for that”. The interdisciplinary approach to reviewing objects adopted by MOWCAS was viewed as advantageous by staff as it allowed them to explore all possibilities for an object before it was being deaccessioned or disposed

One of the more challenging aspects of the deaccessioning process for staff that was brought up during the interviews was dealing with people externally who were upset or angry with the Museum. Waller talked about a mental toughness that is required to deal with what can often be an uncomfortable aspect of deaccessioning.

You have got to be a certain type of person to pick up the phone to an angry message on your answering machine and dial the number and go ‘this is actually what is going on’. We need to be brave enough to do that because it is a tough thing we are doing. It is not comfortable.

Mason similarly mentioned that “it is always fretful to have those conversations. It tests your ability to articulate it”. Bartley reported that he was initially reserved about the process because of the negative responses to deaccessioning. As he says “you put in a lot of work for what can be quite a bad backlash”.

The interviews revealed some internal resistance to the process. Mason sees this as a sign of how hard the process was:

Just the toughness it takes and you have to be strong about it and you have to be consistent with it. There are some internal inconsistencies and it is very hard to break those because that comes down to personal judgement sometimes. We try to beat that by having more than one person making decisions at all times. And that it is never down to one person to decide what is or isn’t part of the collection and I lose as many arguments as I win and others the same...I think generally the staff is on board now. Originally it was a bit of a learning curve for all of us.

Staff also noted that there has been some ongoing resistance from the collection volunteers. With a high percentage of the volunteers coming from the former Maritime Museum or maritime backgrounds this is perhaps not unexpected. Having this internal resistance however, has helped Museum staff verbalise the reasons for the deaccessioning along with the direction for the collection and Museum in general. Waller believes that it was really good for the collection volunteers to be able to express their issues and concerns about deaccessioning and, as with external stakeholders, Waller reiterated the importance of being open and transparent with the

collection volunteers about deaccessioning decisions. Waller also reported that despite the process being hard on some of the volunteers they have started to receive some positive feedback and one volunteer had recently told him that “finally we can see a direction [whereas] before we felt like we were doing it for the sake of doing it”.

MOWCAS deaccessioning has met with disappointment, upset and anger amongst sectors of the Wellington public, particularly within the local maritime community. The Maritime Lobby Group and former MOWCAS Director Ken Scadden have been vocal in expressing their anger at the Museum’s decision to deaccession maritime objects seeing it as a betrayal of the Museum’s former role as a Maritime Museum. It is natural that those who invested in the Maritime Museum see the new direction as a rejection of their interests and the effort that was put into building the collection. Mason recognises the good will and trust that was put into building this collection and expresses the view that “you sort of have to keep your mind on that as well because it is easy to be a little bit flippant around it”.

Thompson recognised that deaccessioning could be hard on people who donated objects to the museum because people had emotional connections with the objects that were gifted. As he explains “when people donate objects to museums they are often as memorials to people or they are memorials to their own lives. They are very heavily emotionally invested in them and when the museum says it no longer wishes [to retain] this object people find that very hard to take”. Furthermore he adds that sometimes people donate to museums because they do not want to throw things away and by donating to museums they relieve themselves of the guilt they would have felt if they disposed of the object themselves. When the museum decides to deaccession the object he states that the “guilt they have themselves gets expressed as anger at the museum”. Likewise people often have a sense of pride and validation knowing that objects in a museum’s collection are connected to their own history and when the museum later decides to get rid of these objects they may see it as the museum saying that their history is not important.

Mason, when questioned about whether deaccessioning was perceived as a potential risk to future donations, was doubtful that this would be an issue for MOWCAS as he says the Museum is not typically seen as a collecting institution. With the exception of maritime objects, he says that

generally people first offer objects that have a historical significance to institutions such as Te Papa. Additionally Mason pointed out that there had been one donor, who had formerly donated objects to the Museum that were being considered for deaccessioning, who ended up offering something else to the Museum instead. In this instance the Museum had been working with the donor to improve acquisition information that had been unclear for objects that were being considered for deaccessioning. Mason reported that while the donor was disappointed to hear that the Museum was deaccessioning, he accepted the Museum's decision. Mason believed that this was a good example of how an open and upfront approach resulted in a better outcome. However, Thompson had previously reported in an article that a retired mariner had been upset with the Museum's decision to remove model ships from their displays and had rethought his decision to leave his maritime collection to the Museum and would be donating it instead to Voyager in Auckland (2007, 12).

Mason believes that deaccessioning decisions should not be made based on what may or may not be donated in the future as this would result in a collection that does not fit with the Museum's collection policy. Ensuring that deaccessioning did not negatively impact on donations according to Mason, came back to protecting the museum's reputation by ensuring that people were aware of what the Museum was trying to achieve by deaccessioning and making sure this was clearly communicated. Moreover the Museum's current Deed of Gift Agreement should also alleviate any future potential issues with deaccessioning donated objects. Under the current deed of gift, donors acknowledge that clear legal title is transferred to Museums Wellington and that the Museum has the right to dispose of the objects in line with the institution's guidelines at the time of disposal (Museums Wellington b, 2).

Because of public misconceptions around deaccessioning terminology and limited understanding of museum processes one of the key findings of Museums Association's (UK) 2006 report on deaccessioning, suggests that public perception of deaccessioning can be managed "through the provision of context, a decision-making process and a contact for further information" (MA 2006, 4). Highlighting the benefits of deaccessioning is also suggested in the report to decrease negative public perceptions of the process. MOWCAS's open and transparent approach has proven to provide rewarding relationships in some instances. In support of MA's findings, all of the

MOWCAS staff interviewed stressed the importance of transparency and openness with the process. On the Museum's website the public can access MOWCAS's Collection Policy, Procedures statement about the direction of the Museum's collection and a list of deaccessioned objects. Staff interviewed also stated that they encouraged dialogue between the public, donors and interest groups, reporting that most people were generally understanding of what the Museum was doing once they were provided with the context and reasoning behind the decision to deaccession objects. As Thompson states "the majority of people once you explain what the collection policy is and what you are doing accept it...a few don't because they particularly like model ships". Mason further adds that "people were generally reasonable and understanding, that for people who have given stuff to us in the past when we have talked to them about what we have done and why we are doing it, more often than not they are quite reasonable. They can understand that things have changed and values change".

Recognising that most of the concern about deaccessioning came from the older sector of the Wellington community, Waller also tried to mitigate negative public perceptions in the community by speaking directly to people rather than communicating by email. As Waller explains "if you can talk to them on the phone, go out and chat to them and say this is what we are doing, this is why we are doing it and put out that hand and say if you want to see the collection store....come out and see for yourself what we are trying to do".

Staff accepted that there were certain interest groups, such as the Maritime Lobby group, that would never be on board with the changes. While Mason thought that the Museum could have initially communicated better with some of these groups, he acknowledged that they may never have been supportive or accepting of the deaccessioning happening at MOWCAS. As Mason rationalises, this is because informing these groups on deaccessioning decisions "doesn't resolve the issue that they have which is that there should be a focused museum like that and I can't answer that for them because that was a decision that was made many years ago. All we are trying to do is what it [MOWCAS] was set up to do". Thompson further adds that "the Maritime Lobby thinks we are deaccessioning maritime objects and even though we try and explain that no we are deaccessioning objects that don't fit the collection policy. If maritime objects fit the

collection policy of course we keep it. But because they are emotionally invested in it they see it as that and there is nothing you can do about it”.

MOWCAS’s current approach to collections may be effective for them at present and perhaps more sustainable in the long term, but there are questions about what would happen if the Museum shifted focus in the future. When asked about this, Mason responded that this was a possibility but “all you can do is apply the policy that you have in front of you today and if you have set the policy to reflect the core elements of what the museum is those potentially won’t change. The fact that we are in Wellington is not going to change. The fact that we reflect Wellington is not going to change”. While it is true that the regional focus of the museum will remain static, Mason’s response perhaps does not take into account shifting demographics in Wellington’s community. If the Museum is to continue to reflect the city’s social and cultural history then as Wellington changes, does this possibly mean that the Museum will also need to change? Changing demographics will impact on the focus of exhibitions, collecting and arguably the role of the Museum itself. However, I would propose that by making deaccessioning an accepted and normalised collection management tool, MOWCAS will be able to acquire and remove objects in order to change the nature of their collection and reflect new focuses.

One of the biggest disappointments that Mason expressed about the deaccessioning is the inability to find someone externally to review their deaccessioning and disposal processes. This would have involved a review of whether the Museum were deaccessioning and disposing of objects in the manner that they stated they would. Unfortunately they found it hard to enlist someone in New Zealand to carry out this review.

Interviews with staff revealed that there were many challenges and risks associated with the deaccessioning and disposal process. These included deaccessioning objects which may later be found to hold significance and upsetting internal and external stakeholders. MOWCAS also faced practical challenges, such as issues with historical documentation along with contending with the time consuming nature of best practice deaccessioning and disposal of objects. Transparency and research were identified by staff as key to mitigating associated risks. In the next chapter I discuss the outcomes of the process and analyse MOWCAS’s utilisation of deaccessioning as a

tool to gain intellectual control over their collection and what the implications may be for other museums utilising this practice.

Chapter Three: Shaping the Collection

The central questions that I aimed to address with this research were *how* and *why* MOWCAS used deaccessioning and disposal within their collection redevelopment and what the benefits are of using this approach. In this chapter I examine the benefits that, according to staff interviewed for this research, MOWCAS have achieved by reviewing collections for deaccessioning and then disposing of some of these collections. In the previous chapter I touched on this briefly providing an outline of the key motivating factors that led the Museum to deaccession and dispose of objects from their collection. While these motivations provided an indication of hoped for outcomes, this chapter expands on this further and analyses what has been achieved through the process.

In the literature review I pointed out that Keith Thomson argued that “it does not seem unreasonable that museums should, wherever possible, upgrade their collections in a manner that increases quality without increasing size” (2002, 95). Furthermore Thomson claims that experience shows deaccessioning to be a useful tool in achieving this. However within the museum sector deaccessioning and disposal is often thought of as a negative process rather than a positive tool for developing collections. In addition deaccessioning and disposal is more often driven by necessity with objects removed for reasons such as deterioration or disputed ownership than through strategic and ongoing programs of collection development. In this chapter I argue that the process has assisted MOWCAS to refine, utilise and understand their collection.

Deaccessioning and disposal was undertaken at MOWCAS within a wider plan of development for the collection that included setting strategies for how the collection would continue to grow and develop. It is important to note that collection development at MOWCAS has predominantly focused on the *current* collection rather than development through new acquisitions.

Deaccessioning and disposal have played an important role in shaping and changing how the Museum’s collection will look in the future.

Knowledge is Power

One of the clear outcomes of the deaccessioning process that was consistently mentioned by staff interviewed was the improvement in knowledge about objects in the collection. Through research and contact with donors Museum staff have gathered information and context not only on the items that were being reviewed for deaccessioning but also those that had not been considered. Mason considers one of the best outcomes of the process was being able to gather more information and further context about items in the collection that they did not have in the past from donors. As Mason explains:

We have found people who have come forward and said we gave this, if you are going to throw it away or give it away we would rather have it back. Quite often those items were the ones that we don't want to give away or dispose of. They were never to be deaccessioned and we have actually been able to find things about them. So it has actually turned around the other way in that we have had more positive out of the disposal or deaccessioning process than negatives in some ways. Not only are we getting a refined collection but we are getting to find out more about the collection.

Further research undertaken on some objects considered for deaccessioning has also revealed links to Wellington's history that were not obvious in the documentation. In particular, Waller provides an example of the model boat *Nestor*⁷ which the museum was considering for deaccessioning.

The further we drilled down and the more research I did on this particular vessel, we actually found out that it had won a prize in the Centennial Exhibition⁸. And we had, in our archives...all the little certificates from the NZ Centennial Exhibition and the *Nestor* had won. So we were creating those links. That is why it was really important for us to do the full audit of the collection, so items which could have been deaccessioned or identified to be deaccessioned, we can look at them and say 'there is more of a story to

⁷ HMS *Nestor* was British Naval ship that served in the 13th Destroyer Flotilla of the Grand Fleet. On the 31st May 1916 HMS *Nestor* was sunk at the Battle of Jutland after being hit by a German battle cruiser squadron of the Imperial Navy's High Seas Fleet. The battle was fought near Jutland, Denmark, and the wreck of HMS *Nestor* is now a protected place under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986.

⁸ From November 1939 to May 1940 the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition was the main event for the commemoration of the 100th year anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Held in the Wellington suburb of Rongotai, the exhibition was intended as a display of New Zealand's progress and achievement and attracted over 2.6 million visitors. Attractions included a model of the Waitomo Caves, replicas of the Crown Jewels, miniature railway and fairground rides along with displays by Department of Agriculture, Industries and Commerce, and Defence.

this *Nestor*, because it was a vessel from the Battle of Jutland it has got no connection to us but the fact that it was displayed in the NZ Centennial Exhibition and won a prize that is the connection.....There was this really lovely story that we drew out of our collection and that's why the research is so important, that we find those hidden connections.

Mason also responded similarly, noting that “even though there are many things that are weighted as maritime, it is interesting how you can turn them around and make them stories about or have a significance that is beyond maritime just by thinking of it in a much more holistic way”. For Mason one of the unexpected outcomes of the review was the opportunity to view the collection in a way that was unusual for a museum director. As he explains “the fact that you walk the collection you get to know it in a way that you never thought you would know it. In my role it is unusual to know the collection in that way other than what is on display or really picked out for me”.

Thompson provides another example in which he alludes to how collection size can limit what staff may know about objects in their collections.

With thousands of objects in the collection you can't be intimate with each of them....you get some lovely surprises. A surprise I found was a sporran...so we had a badger skin sporran in the collection which I thought was one of the most wonderful things I had seen and of course that as an object lends itself to all sorts of things. It's a symbol of Scotland...It came from the Wellington Historical Early Settlers Association's collection so it was brought to Wellington by an early settler, obviously of Scottish origin, who felt proudly enough about being Scottish to bring it to New Zealand. There is a lovely story that we can use to illustrate when we are talking about immigration.

An additional benefit of the process that Thompson mentioned was being able to physically see and in some instances handle the objects while they reviewed the collections. Thompson advocates that this type of contact with objects is beneficial as “you can read a collection description which might say something like cup and saucer but when you actually look at that cup and saucer you may say that has got these gorgeous aesthetic qualities...there are things objects tell us that often words don't”. These examples and statements suggest that the deaccessioning process can provide a different perspective of the collection to that previously assumed, allowing staff to explore and get to know the physical objects in their own right.

When deaccessioning is undertaken within ethical recommendations, the emphasis on retention means that thorough research is necessary to prove that an object is not of historical or cultural significance to the museum. The information and data collected on objects may in turn encourage greater utilisation. As Thompson suggests deaccessioning can be a positive process, “because you have to register and research things before you deaccession them that improves the quality not only of the collection records but improves quality of access to collections”.

Through the process of being assessed for deaccessioning, objects were given visibility and their histories were fleshed out, interpreted and discussed. Had the Museum not been actively assessing their collection these objects may have continued to have been left as orphaned collections – unresearched, under utilised, poorly documented or hidden within the collection. Thus, the deaccessioning process should be considered as much a process of discovery as rejection, or alternatively be viewed as a process of assessing objects for re-accessioning rather than removal.

Greater Access

Loss of information and inaccessibility are often used in the argument against deaccessioning. Rather than limiting or restricting access, deaccessioning can lead to greater access and utilisation. At the 2003 UK Museum Directors Conference *Too Much Stuff*, it was concluded that museums should consider deaccessioning and disposal of objects when this will “better ensure their preservation, ensure that they are widely used and enjoyed, or place them in a context where they are more valued and better understood (cited in Caldwell 2011, 48). In order to mitigate the risk of an object being removed from public ownership many museums often elect to transfer deaccessioned objects to other public institutions.

A vast number of deaccessioned objects have been disposed of by MOWCAS to other public institutions in New Zealand. Staff argued that these objects have benefited through this disposal method because they will be more accessible and better utilised. An example of this provided by staff is the Harbour Board scrapbooks which have been transferred to Wellington City Archives.

Although not formally deaccessioned, the HMH scrapbooks have also been transferred to the Torpedo Navy Museum in Auckland. The HMH scrapbook will be digitised and made accessible online for WWI commemorations providing greater virtual access to the information within the scrapbook. Researchers in Harbour Board history will also benefit by having all the information accessible in one place. Waller believes that the disposals that have been transferred to other public institutions have been a positive outcome for the Museum because “it is stuff that is sitting in our storeroom which is never going to see the light of day. So if we can get it to people who can either digitise it or display it physically then that should really be one of the aims or one of the positive outcomes of the deaccessioning process”. Similarly Mason stated that the “outcome that we are trying to achieve is for the betterment of the whole collection and even if that means the collection is broken up, taken to other places...that is a better outcome than sitting, not knowing, not researched, no one even knowing that it exists”.

Another example of positive outcomes were objects transferred to other public institutions who had other potential uses for them. An example of this is the Worser Bay Surf boat. As Waller explains:

They [Worser Bay Surf Club] didn't want it back [so] we transferred it to Wellington Zoo because I knew that they were doing a sea animals display and they were looking for large objects. They picked it up and it is going to be used in one of their new displays. Fabulous result for us. We built connections and they [Wellington Zoo] are a CCO [Council Controlled Organisation]...so it will stay within Wellington.

Both Waller and Mason hoped that MOWCAS's decision to deaccession would have a flow on effect with other museums starting to question whether they had objects in their collections that could potentially be transferred to other institutions that would be able to utilise them. Mason noted that Te Manawa had deaccessioned objects which had been transferred to MOWCAS and had “improved and increased the value of our collection hugely...Within six months of being offered it, we were able to put it out on display and made a major temporary exhibition out of it”.

Building Relationships and Sharing Collections

Very little is mentioned in deaccessioning literature about the positive and beneficial relationships between public institutions that can come out of the process. In contrast, the data gathered for this research revealed a lot of positive outcomes. Waller for example recognised the potential to build ongoing partnerships with other public institutions as an outcome of the deaccessioning and disposal process. In particular Waller mentions that there has been discussion between MOWCAS and Wellington City Archives on a potential to link their collection management systems which would allow them to access information about objects in each other's collections. Waller states that this has been "one of the things I am trying to develop as well within this deaccessioning process—anything that is being deaccessioned, we actually have relationships within New Zealand".

Mason was less inclined to view improved relationships with other public institutions as an outcome of deaccessioning, however he believed that the process built a better understanding of how other institutions worked their collections and the areas that they collected. This might prove advantageous to the Museum when considering that one of the key elements of Wellington Museums Trust's Collection Policy is to take into account the collection policies of other museums and organisations collecting in the same areas to avoid unnecessary duplication (2009b, 24). This approach is consistent with Gardner's recommendation that museums should be able to "identify not only what makes it unique but where it isn't, where collecting responsibilities can be shared" (forthcoming 2014, 30). While Waller and Mason had varying opinions about the effect that deaccessioning could have on building relationships with other public institutions, they both provided statements that indicated that deaccessioning could be beneficial to the disposing and the receiving institution. Whether it was Te Manawa transferring items that added value to MOWCAS's collection or collaborative opportunities with other museums, deaccessioning has the potential to foster a culture of sharing and transferring of collections that will be beneficial to the sector.

In instances where the Museum disposed of objects by return to the original donor, donor's family or estate, Mason felt that these objects were no worse off, in terms of being accessible,

even though they were no longer in public ownership. As he explains “at least we know we had it and we have given it to someone so if anyone actually did ever ask us we can say we know that we gave it to that person, therefore if you went to them they may be able to help you”.

Elaborating on Mason’s statement, access to deaccessioned objects can still be feasible albeit perhaps with more difficulty. This is possible because MOWCAS retains records of deaccessioned objects and who they are returned to. One further point I would stress is that just because an object is transferred to a public museum or institution does not necessarily mean it will be accessible as this is dependant on whether the museum has the means or desire to make it accessible. Public ownership and access are not necessarily the same thing.

Repurposing Collections

From my perspective one of the strengths of the deaccessioning process at MOWCAS is the involvement of staff from different areas. As mentioned in the previous chapter the assessments have been carried out mainly by Thompson, Waller and Mason with additional input from collections staff, volunteers and in some instances external experts. Historical, political and cultural significance was covered by Mason and Thompson while Waller brought an exhibition, design and collection care perspective to the assessments. This has resulted in a multitude of viewpoints being expressed when assessing objects, which allows for all possibilities for an object to be explored before it is deaccessioned or disposed of. It also recognises that objects can be utilised in carrying out a museum’s mission in different ways and for MOWCAS staff has allowed them to explore other potential uses for objects. This has been illustrated with Waller being able to identify objects that could be used as props or design elements for exhibitions or used as teaching collections by the Museum’s educator. An example of this could be seen in the Museum’s exhibition *10 years in Wonderland* which ran from the 27th November 2009 to 23rd May 2010. The exhibition celebrated 10 years of being Wellington’s city museum and is described on the website as “unusual objects from the museum collection on display in a Mad Hatter tea party inspired setting, this quirky and whimsical exhibition took you into a wonderland of hidden treasures” (MOWCAS website). The exhibition included a bookcase of valuable books from the Museum’s collection but there were also books that were hanging and suspended in

space. The museum was able to achieve the design effect by using books that were either duplicates or copies selected for disposal and as Mason adds they were able to be “repurposed in a very imaginative way for books”.

Taking Control

Since MOWCAS extended their mission to include the social and cultural history of Wellington there has been an increase in visitors. During the years the Museum was a Maritime Museum visitor numbers were approximately 30,000 per year (Thompson 2007, 9). Now the Museum receives around 90 000 visitors per year. Judging by visitor numbers alone this means that significantly more people are utilising and engaging with the Museum and accessing the collections than they were when it was a Maritime Museum. Thompson argues that due to the Museum receiving public funding they have a duty to make the Museum as “accessible and interesting to as wide a number of people as possible as it is their money, with specialist interests groups being catered to through temporary shows, exhibitions and programmes” (2007, 10). Thompson’s statements suggests that while a museum’s traditional stakeholders are important, with interests that need to be represented, their views should not prevent collection and institutional redevelopment aimed to meet the needs of other audiences. This is especially important when continued funding is dependant on attracting and engaging with wider audiences.

While consultation with external interest groups can be rewarding, it also may potentially hinder the control museums have in shaping their collections. A valid point raised by Thompson is that there are variances in the relationship museum professionals and audiences have to collections. This can impact on how deaccessioning is perceived externally. As Thompson asserts:

There is a psychological and emotive aspect to deaccessioning that people within the museum, they haven’t got that closeness, that psychological, emotional closeness to objects. They are professionals applying hopefully a rigorous and professional process. People who are upset about it are not applying a rigorous process; they are emotionally invested in it.

Museums may need to take into consideration that external interest groups may be unaware of the burden of care that collections place on collecting institutions. In the previous chapter I

mentioned the incident of a potential donor advising Thompson that he was not going to leave his maritime collection to the Museum because he was unhappy with the Museum removing some of their maritime objects from display. Thompson's response to this potential donor was that for the Museum, "as long as it was in a publically-owned collection somewhere being looked after and made accessible, we could always borrow it if needed". Thompson reported that the potential donor "had never thought about the bigger issues of public ownership, co-operation between museums and why museums collect and display things and who pays for them" (2007, 12). In another instance Thompson reported that he had received a call from a member of the public upset that the museum was selling a deaccessioned Titanic Model. Thompson stated the person was concerned about the deaccessioning because they still believed the Museum was a maritime museum. And as Thompson explains "I think it probably shows that they weren't interested in the Museum if their conception of it was ten years out of date". While it would not be advisable for museums be flippant about external stakeholders, there should be an awareness that the interest these groups have in retaining collections may not be in the best interest of the museum.

Taking Shape: Reflections on deaccessioning and its role in shaping the collection

This chapter sought to examine the outcomes of deaccessioning in order to understand how the process can shape a museum's collection. It seems to me that the evidence points to the conclusion that through deaccessioning MOWCAS have improved and shaped their collection in a number of ways. Firstly throughout the process research conducted on objects along with information provided by donors and the public has increased knowledge about the items in the collection. This means that while the Museum's collection will decrease in size there will be more depth and context for the objects that are retained. Additionally the process has led to a greater understanding of the collection as a whole, because deaccessioning offers an opportunity that staff might not necessarily have been provided with otherwise to get to know the collection. Both Mason and Thompson alluded to this with Mason stating that traditionally he only saw the objects which had been handpicked for him, while Thompson suggested that it is impossible to be intimate with the whole collection. I would further suggest that this will assist in identifying

collection gaps as the Museum is in a better position to do this now that they have a better understanding of the collection as a whole.

Secondly, deaccessioning has led to greater utilisation of the collection. Staff interviewed provided examples of objects that had been discovered during the assessment process that could be utilised in exhibitions and museum activities. These included objects that were deaccessioned but could be used as visual elements within exhibitions at the Museum. With a current emphasis placed on display, deaccessioning objects that are duplicates or unworthy of the 'core' collection, has meant that they can be freed up and used in ways that accessioned collection items cannot, because these collections do not require the same level of conservation treatment and care. They can be touched, altered and used in creative ways. These types of tactile or usable collections can often be as important as permanent collections for communicating a museum's mission. Collection utilisation was also the subject of Frances Speer's (2006) research which proposes that the value of collections is increasingly measured against their usefulness for exhibitions and the benefits they provide visitors often without an understanding of how museums operate and why collections may not be on display. This case study expands on Speer's research, suggesting that some of the limitations of display placed on collections can be resolved through deaccessioning and freeing up collections for different types of use.

Thirdly the deaccessioning and disposal process allowed MOWCAS to distribute objects to other museums and public institutions. This has a twofold benefit. The Museum is able to remove objects that they had no use for and disperse them to other institutions which are able to provide better access, utilisation and in some instances preservation. As well as this, Museum staff have been able to build relationships with other institutions and gain an understanding of how these institutions collect. This approach reflects a change in institutional collecting that views collection responsibilities as being shared by institutions collectively rather than the sole responsibility of individual museums. Other benefits include fostering a culture of exchange and ensuring that collections can continue to grow but also be sustainable as each museum focuses in on their own unique collecting areas.

Fourthly, while staff may have played down the practical benefits of deaccessioning, such as improved conditions and greater space in the collection store, there *have* been noticeable differences that may not have been achievable without clearing out the clutter of objects unrelated to the Museum's mission. Having personally seen the conditions of the store before and after the refurbishment it is clear to me that the objects are more easily able to be located and identified and the marked improvements in conditions in the storeroom, such as temperature control, make it a better environment for staff to work in and for those visiting the store. Recently the museum has begun to offer public tours of the space. This provides a unique but valuable opportunity for the public to view behind the scenes museum work and also create an understanding of how museums store and preserve their collections. It is questionable whether this would have happened pre-refurbishment.

Finally, through deaccessioning the Museum has been able to start to bring balance to their collection which previously over-represented maritime objects. Removing objects that are unrelated to the Museum's current mission will mean that the Museum will have the space to grow their collection in other areas that have been underrepresented. Despite external and internal opposition to the deaccessioning, the firm and logical approach of staff has ensured that rational and strategic decisions are made about the future of the collection. In doing so they are not confining the collection to what currently exists but working towards what it could be with objects serving a clearly defined role that is integrated with the mission of the Museum.

Conclusion

In this conclusion I summarise the findings of the dissertation, provide recommendations for further research and outline the contribution that this research has made to museum practice and museum studies. The central questions of this dissertation were: *how and why is the Museum of Wellington City and Sea utilising deaccessioning within their collection redevelopment and what benefits are gained through this process?* In a broader sense what I have been examining is whether deaccessioning is a worthwhile process for museums to go through.

Deaccessioning is a controversial museum practice and there are divided opinions on whether museums should retain objects in perpetuity or whether deaccessioning and disposal are an effective and necessary aspect of good collection management. For this reason, Chapter One focused on recommendations for best practice deaccessioning that are provided by influential museum organisations such as Museums Association (UK) and American Alliance of Museums. Within New Zealand, these recommendations have clearly been adapted by National Services and Museums Aotearoa, perhaps without considering the possibility that some of the guidelines may not be suitable within a New Zealand context. Consistent recommendations across all these organisations include: retention of objects in public ownership, revenue gathered from disposal by sale is directed back into the collections and consultation with external stakeholders such as donors. In this chapter I questioned whether having a guideline that recommended objects be transferred to other public organisations in New Zealand is appropriate considering that a recent survey showed that resourcing and financially supporting collections was a concern for the sector. This may not only be relevant to New Zealand as overseas writers have also challenged the long term viability of disposals by transfer (see, for example, Merriman in Kendall 2012 and Thomson 2002). This chapter also revealed that practice has influenced deaccessioning guidelines as seen with MA's change in stance towards financially motivated disposals prompted by the recession in the UK and the financial pressure faced by museums in the current economic climate. Lastly this chapter also provided background information on MOWCAS, tracing its history from a small one room museum showcasing the Harbour Board's collection to a professionally run Council Controlled museum. This background provided context for how changes at the Museum influenced their decision to deaccession objects from their collection.

Chapter Two focused on the deaccessioning process at MOWCAS. This chapter addressed the first two questions I posed, namely the *how* and *why* of deaccessioning. In this chapter I provided the motivating factors for deaccessioning, described how the process worked, outlined the challenges staff faced throughout the process and what staff saw as perceived risks and how they mitigated these. The emphasis in this chapter was to provide an overview of the process from the perspective of staff directly involved. What clearly came through was that the deaccessioning was being driven by a need to align the collection to the Museum's current policy and provide balance to a collection that was dominated with maritime objects. Staff were generally positive about the process although they were open to discuss the challenges and risks associated.

The assessment process developed by staff for reviewing collections was flexible, qualitative and multidisciplinary. During the assessments staff questioned objects significance to Wellington and how they could be used to tell a Wellington story. One of the clear points that came through when talking with the professionals involved with the process is that the role of the collection within a museum needs to be clearly articulated. For MOWCAS this has meant deciding that the collection is utilised for exhibition and display and not necessarily for research.

While staff reported that there were many challenges faced with the process, their responses revealed that these challenges could be turned into positives and result in beneficial outcomes for the Museum. An example of this was former donors who had come forward after being concerned about the deaccessioning. This has resulted in staff being able to gather information and context about some of the objects in the collection along with the opportunity to disseminate information about the redevelopment at the Museum.

In the final chapter I addressed the last part of my question: *what are the benefits of the process?* As I discovered through the research there have been many benefits for MOWCAS as a result of deaccessioning and disposal. When I started this research I initially believed that the greatest benefit might be *tangible* outcomes such as resolving storage problems and issues with historical collecting. After interviewing staff however my opinion on this altered and I would argue that the greatest benefits of deaccessioning and disposal for MOWCAS have been the *intangible* ones

such as building relationships with other organisations, connecting with donors and refining and improving the quality of their collection. From the staff's perspective they were less concerned about deaccessioning to free up space and more concerned with ensuring that the collection was utilised, accessible and representative of what the museum was about. This finding has led me to argue that deaccessioning and disposal has an important, positive and proactive role in shaping and improving a museum's collection – in short it is a tool for helping museums do their job better.

So how does deaccessioning and disposal improve a museum's collection? Based on this case study I would say MOWCAS have done this in a number of ways. These are: improving context for the collections that have been retained through research and contact with donors; building relationships with other cultural and heritage organisations which encourages interchanging of collections and content between institutions and which may prove to be beneficial in creating a sector wide collecting strategy; increased utilisation of collections as objects are uncovered in the assessment process or deaccessioned and used by the museum as display or educational tools; distribution of unused collections to other organisations or individuals where they will be better utilised and finally enabling the museum to ensure that the collection is relevant and useful for them in carrying out their mission.

I must acknowledge that because this research is only concerned with deaccessioning within one museum the insights provided are limited. As a whole the challenges, risks and outcomes provided in this dissertation may be unique to MOWCAS, although I would argue that there are elements that will resonate with many museums. Other museums may have different approaches to how significance assessments should be carried out. Therefore I believe that further research is vitally important in two areas. Firstly a quantitative survey is required that examines how museums in New Zealand are deaccessioning (or not deaccessioning as the case may be). This survey would reveal how many museums in New Zealand are actually using the process, whether there are variances in how different sized or funded museums deaccession, what are the common challenges and whether museums overall found the process beneficial. This study could also extend to how many museums had accepted disposed objects from other museums and whether these had improved their collection or had been utilised. Secondly further case studies are needed

which provide insight into how different sized museums tackle deaccessioning. For larger museums with vast collections, it would be interesting to see if collection size makes it difficult to create a cohesive collection and whether implementing a collection review that involved deaccessioning collections is problematic. Or alternatively whether museums such as historical house museums or small regional museums find deaccessioning decisions easier as having a narrower collection focus means that defining what should and should not be in a collection is more obvious.

My research and conclusions have a broader application to museum studies and the museum sector as a whole, particularly in New Zealand. Although modest in scale, the research brings some sense of balance to the literature on deaccessioning as well as offering insights on the benefits that museums can gain through the process. The deaccessioning literature has largely focused on the ethics of deaccessioning, with particular emphasis on the associated risks and challenges. There has been little consideration of the benefits and outcomes of deaccessioning, and my research has helped fill that gap in the literature. Additionally I wanted to test the assertions of Thomson (2002), Sola (1999) and Weil (2004), who all suggest that museum collections can benefit from thinning but do not provide substantive evidence for this assertion. The research revealed that there are tangible and intangible benefits to thinning collections. At MOWCAS the removal of objects has resulted in a refined and improved collection that the Museum can utilise for exhibition and display. Thinning the collection also means that MOWCAS are no longer dedicating funds and resources towards maintaining objects that are not relevant to their mission. Therefore my research contributes to museum studies in two important ways. Firstly it provides a comprehensive case study of a New Zealand museum's use of deaccessioning—its motivations and process, the challenges and risks, the outcomes and benefits. Second this case study examines how deaccessioning has aided a museum and its collection and provides concrete examples of this.

Deaccessioning will continue to be a challenging practice for museum professionals and the public. The process questions the sanctity of museum collections and tests long held assumptions about perpetuity. My recommendations from this research would be that a more balanced view of deaccessioning is adopted in the museum sector whereby deaccessioning is considered to be a

part of responsible and good collection management. In recommending this I do not suggest that museums take a cavalier approach to removing collections. Instead, I would advocate that the lessons learned from this case study reveal that when deaccessioning is undertaken with the aim of achieving a focused and refined collection it can result in positive tangible and intangible outcomes for a museum. In order for deaccessioning to be used positively to redevelop collections a multi-disciplinary and transparent approach to assessing collections is required. The deaccessioning should also be undertaken within a wider strategy for redeveloping collections that is integrated with the mission of the museum.

Appendix 1: Interview guide questions

- What is your role at MOWCAS?
- What were your views, either personal or professional, about deaccessioning before going through the process?
- What has been your involvement with the deaccessioning process?
- What led the Museum to deaccession objects from the collection?
- What were the perceived benefits or outcomes that the Museum hoped to achieve by deaccessioning collections?
- What were the perceived risks of deaccessioning and how did you mitigate these?
- What guidance and advice was sought for developing a process for deaccessioning?
- Was there any resistance internally or externally to deaccessioning?
- How was this resistance alleviated?
- Have there been any aspects of deaccessioning that you have found challenging?
- Have there been any practical challenges that you have encountered during the process?
- What have been the outcomes of the process?
- Have there been any unexpected positive or negative outcomes that have come out of the process?
- What are the steps involved in deciding which collections were to be deaccessioned or considered for deaccessioning?
- Did you use a significance framework to determine if objects were to be deaccessioned and if so, could you explain how this framework is used to guide decisions?
- Did intuition or gut instinct also guide decisions about which objects to deaccession?

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- B. **Secondary sources** – books, journal and newspaper articles and theses

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