

Pacific collecting at the National Library of Australia : an update

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This paper provides a brief overview of the National Library of Australia’s Pacific collection of published material, including an update on two recent digital projects undertaken at the Library.

The National Library of Australia’s Pacific collections are amongst the most significant in Australia. Much of the historical breadth and depth of the collections comes from three private collections acquired by the Library in the early part of the twentieth century: the Petherick, Ferguson and Nan Kivell collections. Since these early acquisitions, the Pacific collections have continued to develop. Indeed, the longevity and continuity of the Library’s collecting of Pacific material sets us apart from many other libraries as our collecting of published material in particular has continued throughout the Library’s history. The breadth of the Library’s collecting is also significant. We collect broadly across all areas of the Pacific region and all subjects, excluding the natural and physical sciences.

In terms of the Library’s overseas published collections, the Pacific remains an important focus and the Library continues to collect both material published in the Pacific Region and material related to the Pacific published outside the region. The current collection is as comprehensive as possible, particularly at the national level and in the social sciences and humanities areas. However, material published in the Pacific remains a fairly small component in terms of our overall collecting of overseas publications: last financial year it formed only 3-4% of our overall overseas acquisitions. There are several reasons for this, but the two major reasons are the limited nature of publishing in the Pacific, particularly commercial publishing; and the difficulty of obtaining material published within the region. In the last financial year, the Library acquired 280 current monograph titles published within the Pacific region and another 430 retrospective or Pacific-related titles published outside the Pacific. Many more current serials, mostly government reports, which form a substantial part of our current collection, were also acquired.

The Library relies on a vendor based in Hawaii for the majority of its Pacific acquisitions. This vendor obtains about 90% of the material they supply to us through acquisition trips to the various countries in the region. We also acquire material through our own staff acquisition trips to the region, direct supply of material from publishers, either purchased or gratis; and some Australian vendors who are able to supply a small proportion of current and retrospective material.

We have also recently undertaken two projects, which represent a departure from our main collecting activities: the archiving of Pacific websites, and the creation of a portal to global digitised Pacific resources

The National Library of Australia is one of the early pioneers in web archiving globally. Selective archiving of Asia-Pacific websites, however, only began late last year. So far, several collections of Asia-Pacific websites have been harvested around particular themes. These collections are hosted by Internet Archive, a not-for-profit American company with considerable experience in web archiving. The websites were harvested using their tool – Archive-It. This tool still requires some development so capture was by no means perfect in all cases.

While the actual websites are hosted on the Internet Archive, we have created bibliographic records and our own web pages to facilitate discovery. The Pacific archived websites are featured on www.nla.gov.au/collect/PacificWebArchiveCollections.html.

For the Pacific, two Web Archive collections have been created, both relating to PNG: PNG Elections 2007, and PNG Government & Research Websites. The PNG Elections collection was harvested six months after the election, so some information had already disappeared and only 4 sites were harvested. The collection of PNG Government and research websites is more substantial, covering 49 sites. However, only 11 of these 49 sites have been identified for regular crawling. The other 38 sites appear to be more or less inactive, with little or no information being added to the site since their creation.

The benefits of archiving these web sites include the preservation of publications that we have not been able to obtain in print and archiving of more ephemeral types of information, for example election promotion material from PNG Electoral Commission (which we had tried to obtain in print but were unsuccessful).

The second project involved creating an online gateway on the Library's website to digitised Pacific collections in Australia and around the world. The gateway provides a brief description and links to over 30 collections of documentary materials relating to the history, culture and people of the Pacific region held within the Pacific or in education and cultural heritage institutions internationally. All collections are freely accessible via the Internet. Materials accessible through this gateway include digitised photographs, line drawings, diaries, log books, maps, nautical charts, rare books, newspapers, theses and audio recordings. At the time, it was the first portal of its kind to bring such resources together in one place for easy access for researchers. The Digitised Pacific Resources : Global Collections portal can be found at: <http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/digitised-pacific-resources.html>.

The Library faces some challenges in continuing to develop and promote its Pacific collections. The difficulty in obtaining material from the Pacific can be an issue in an environment when resources, particularly staffing, are becoming tighter. The Library's Pacific published collections are subsumed into our general overseas collections, which presents a challenge in terms of promoting its existence to researchers. For this reason, having a Pacific Collections page on our website is very important as this enables us to provide a Pacific focus that might otherwise be lacking. The Library's collection web pages are currently being reviewed and the Pacific Collections page will be revamped as part of this review. This may provide the Library with the opportunity to provide additional emphasis to our Pacific collections.

Despite these challenges, the Pacific region will remain an important focus of the National Library of Australia's overseas collecting activities just as the region continues to be important to Australia as a whole. We hope to continue to expand our activities and look at new ways of collecting material and promoting our Pacific collections.