

Conference Abstract

Collections from Colonial Australia in Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde and the Challenges of Data Accessibility

Anja Schwarz[‡], Fiona Möhrle^{‡,§}, Sabine von Mering[§]

[‡] University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany

[§] Museum für Naturkunde – Leibniz Institute for Evolution and Biodiversity Science, Berlin, Germany

Corresponding author: Sabine von Mering (sabine.vonmering@mfn.berlin)

Received: 31 Aug 2023 | Published: 01 Sep 2023

Citation: Schwarz A, Möhrle F, von Mering S (2023) Collections from Colonial Australia in Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde and the Challenges of Data Accessibility. Biodiversity Information Science and Standards 7: e111980. <https://doi.org/10.3897/biss.7.111980>

Abstract

German-speaking naturalists working in southeastern Australia in the mid-19th century relied heavily on the expertise of First Nations intermediaries who acted as guides, collectors, traders and translators (Clarke 2008, Olsen and Russell 2019). Many of these naturalists went to Australia because of the research opportunities offered by the British Empire at a time when the German nation states did not have colonies of their own. Others sought to escape political upheaval at home. They were welcome employees for colonial government agencies due to their training in the emerging research-oriented natural sciences that the reformed German universities offered at a time when British universities were still providing a broad general education (Home 1995, Kirchberger 2000).

[Wilhelm von Blandowski](#) (1822–1878) and [Gerard Krefft](#) (1830–1881), who both worked in colonial Victoria and New South Wales, are among this group. Throughout their work, they corresponded extensively with naturalists in Berlin, exchanging specimens and ideas. But the preserved Australian animals, plants and rock samples, as well as the written and drawn records of animals and landscapes now held at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN), are much more than objects of scientific interest. They also contain information about Australia's First Nations. The collections provide evidence of their role in collecting as well as their knowledge of the natural world, which has long been overlooked

and, at least in part deliberately, made invisible by Western knowledge systems (e.g., Das and Lowe 2018, Ashby 2020).

People data have been recognised as crucial for linking such collection objects with expeditions, publications, archival material and correspondence (Groom et al. 2020, Groom et al. 2022). It can thus potentially help reconstruct invisibilized Indigenous histories and knowledge. However, while the MfN keeps information about European collectors and other non-indigenous agents associated with their specimens in internal catalogues, databases and wikis, Indigenous actors remain largely absent from these repositories, which reproduce the colonial archive 'along the archival grain' (Stoler 2009).

With this in mind, we discuss in our presentation the complexities of using persistent identifiers and tools, such as [Wikidata](#), to improve the integration and linkage of people data in the work currently being undertaken by the MfN and the [Berlin's Australian Archive project](#) to digitise and make accessible the museum's collections. Drawing upon the guidance provided by the FAIR*¹ and CARE*² principles for data (Wilkinson et al. 2016, Carroll et al. 2020), and learning from the [2012 ATSLIRN Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services](#)*³, the [2019 Tandanya Adelaide Declaration](#) and the [2020 AIATSIS Code of Ethics](#)*⁴, we address the potential of these efforts in terms of collection accessibility, and also highlight the challenges and limitations of this approach in the context of colonial collections.

Keywords

Australia's First Nations, CARE principle, colonial collections, FAIR data, Indigenous knowledge, knowledge transfer, natural history collections, Wikidata

Presenting author

Sabine von Mering

Presented at

TDWG 2023

Acknowledgements

This contribution is closely linked to the project Berlin's Australian Archive funded by the German Lost Art Foundation.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

References

- Ashby J (2020) Telling the Truth About Who Really Collected the "Hero Collections". Natural Science Collections Association Blog URL: <https://natsca.blog/2020/10/22/telling-the-truth-about-who-really-collected-the-hero-collections/>
- Carroll SR, Garba I, Figueroa-Rodríguez O, Holbrook J, Lovett R, Materechera S, Parsons M, Raseroka K, Rodríguez-Lonebear D, Rowe R, Sara R, Walker J, Anderson J, Hudson M (2020) The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance. *Data Science Journal* 19 (43): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.5334/dsj-2020-043>
- Clarke PA (2008) *Aboriginal Plant Collectors. Botanists and Australian Aboriginal People in the Nineteenth Century*. Rosenberg Publishing, Kenthurst, NSW.
- Das S, Lowe M (2018) Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections. *Journal of Natural Science Collections* 6: 4-14. URL: <https://natsca.org/sites/default/files/publications/JoNSC-Vol6-DasandLowe2018.pdf>
- Groom Q, Güntsch A, Huybrechts P, Kearney N, Leachman S, Nicolson N, Page RDM, Shorthouse DP, Thessen AE, Haston E (2020) People are essential to linking biodiversity data. *Database* 2020: baaa072. <https://doi.org/10.1093/database/baaa072>
- Groom Q, Bräuchler C, Cubey R, Dillen M, Huybrechts P, Kearney N, Klazenga N, Leachman S, Paul DL, Rogers H, Santos J, Shorthouse D, Vaughan A, von Mering S, Haston E (2022) The disambiguation of people names in biological collections. *Biodiversity Data Journal* 10: e86089. <https://doi.org/10.3897/BDJ.10.e86089>
- Home RW (1995) *Science as a German export to nineteenth century Australia*. Working papers in Australian studies, 104. Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, London. [ISBN 185507074X]
- Kirchberger U (2000) Deutsche Naturwissenschaftler im britischen Empire. Die Erforschung der außereuropäischen Welt im Spannungsfeld zwischen deutschem und britischem Imperialismus. *Historische Zeitschrift* 271 (3): 621-660. <https://doi.org/10.1524/hzhz.2000.271.jg.621>
- Olsen P, Russell L (2019) *Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous Peoples' Contribution to Early Zoology*. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- Stoler AL (2009) *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Wilkinson M, Dumontier M, Aalbersberg IJ, Appleton G, Axton M, Baak A, Blomberg N, Boiten J, da Silva Santos LB, Bourne P, Bouwman J, Brookes A, Clark T, Crosas M, Dillo I, Dumon O, Edmunds S, Evelo C, Finkers R, Gonzalez-Beltran A, Gray AG, Groth P, Goble C, Grethe J, Heringa J, 't Hoen PC, Hooft R, Kuhn T, Kok R, Kok J, Lusher S, Martone M, Mons A, Packer A, Persson B, Rocca-Serra P, Roos M, van Schaik R, Sansone S, Schultes E, Sengstag T, Slater T, Strawn G, Swertz M, Thompson M, van der Lei J, van Mulligen E, Velterop J, Waagmeester A, Wittenburg P, Wolstencroft K, Zhao J, Mons B (2016) The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship. *Scientific Data* 3: 160018. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2016.18>

Endnotes

- *1 Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable
- *2 Collective benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics
- *3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network
- *4 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies