



British Columbia  
Museums Association  
SINCE 1957

# Best Practices module

## **FIRST NATIONS: DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS**

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## Contents

Introduction	Page 2
Mandate, Policy, and Practice	Page 3/4
Protocols	Page 5/6
Topics of Mutual Concern	Page 7/8
Collections	Page 9/10/11
Loans	Page 12
Conclusion	Page 12
Resources	Page 13

*The BC Museums Association gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance granted by the Government of Canada, through the Department of Canadian Heritage under the "Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program (CAHSP) - Capacity Building Component for Heritage Organizations.*



## Introduction

This module is relevant to those museums whose mandate specifically reference First Nations or whose operations include the human history of British Columbia. This module was developed to reflect the recommendations of the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association joint *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples (1991)*. In essence, this module recommends that museums develop relationships and partnerships with First Nations concerning the research, preservation and interpretation of their artifacts, culture and history.

The potential rewards of such relationships and partnerships include:

- Greater understanding and co-operation between museums and First Nations.
- Development of partnerships that assist in attracting funding.
- Broader appeal and historical relevance of the museum's collections and displays.
- Richer and more detailed documentation of collections.
- Increased opportunities for museums to research and interpret First Nations' history and culture.



## Mandate, Policy, and Practice

### Mandate

Many museums are mandated to collect and display materials relating to human history in B.C. Some museums specifically mandate the collection, preservation and exhibition of First Nations' materials.

*TIP:*

*Whether a museum's mandate, collections or displays include First Nations materials or not, a review of its operations may reveal that First Nations' topics are involved. For example, a community museum that depicts local history should include First Nations' traditions and cultures in order to present a complete and balanced view of regional history.*

### Policy

Museums' policies should include elements that address the following:

- Museums should develop and maintain relationships with First Nations whose artifacts are stored or whose culture and history are interpreted or researched.
- Museums should acknowledge the authority of First Nations in the research and interpretation of their history and cultural heritage.
- Museums should seek direction and participation from First Nations in the interpretation of their culture and history in the museum's exhibits and public programs and the care and custody of First Nations' material in the museum's collections.
- Museums should acknowledge that materials from a particular First Nation are part of the intellectual property of that First Nation. Such First Nations' materials may include ancestral remains, burial objects, utilitarian and ceremonial artifacts, as well as archival material such as songs, tape recordings, videotapes and photographs. It should be recognized that a museum's ownership or custody of certain artifacts may include responsibilities concerning their storage, display or other use.

### Practice

This section introduces elements that can be included in museums' operations concerning First Nations. The interests of museums and First Nations often overlap. Some examples of shared interests include:

- Research and interpretation of human history in British Columbia.
- Documentation, security and maintenance of cultural artifacts and materials.
- Potential of cultural and other tourism programs.
- Attracting sources of funding for projects.



## **Mandate, Policy, and Practice** cont'd...

Museums and First Nations can obtain mutual benefits from an array of potential partnerships or relationship agreements, hereafter called “protocols.” Museums whose mandate, policies or activities involve or impact First Nations should develop protocols with those First Nations. The purpose of a protocol is to provide the basis for a respectful relationship that recognizes the traditions, processes and interests of both parties. Protocols may range from informal understandings to the effect that the parties will consult on issues and activities as required, to detailed, written co-management agreements.

*TIP:*

*Protocols with First Nations can assist museums in programs or projects for exhibits, research, education and public programs, tourism initiatives and more. Funding agencies’ grant criteria generally favour proposals that include First Nations’ and community partnership components.*



## Protocols

There are two steps in the development of a relationship with a First Nation, described below:

### Contact

A museum should first refer to its mandate and operations to investigate and identify the First Nations whose history, interests, territories or collections are logically involved in the museum's activities. When those First Nations have been identified, they should be contacted. A letter, directed to a First Nation's Chief and Council, indicating an interest in exploring partnership opportunities, is suggested. A contact listing for all First Nations in British Columbia can be found at: [http://www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/aboriginal\\_dir/guide.htm](http://www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/aboriginal_dir/guide.htm).

### Protocol Development

The process for developing protocols will vary for each First Nation. First Nation organizations generally contain a:

- Political level (elected chief and council).
- Operational level (First Nations' staff).
- An expert or "authority" level (hereditary chiefs, elders).

These levels correspond roughly with a typical community museum's organization thus:

- Political (mayor).
- Operational (museum director).
- Expert (museum curator).

Some First Nations incorporate traditional political structure in their organization. In the process of developing a protocol between a museum and a First Nation, care should be taken to ensure that appropriate representatives from both parties are involved at each stage. An initial meeting, or meetings, should be held to discuss, identify and agree on common interests. Later discussions can determine the scope and nature of an appropriate protocol. Protocols between a museum and a First Nation may outline a simple, agreed-upon process for developing projects of mutual interest or the means for resolving particular issues. They can also be more formalized and address specific topics or a wide range of issues.

In some instances, a protocol may simply designate a representative from the museum and an authority from the First Nation who are tasked to work together to develop plans and partnerships or to address and resolve issues as they arise. It is recommended that regularized meetings of representatives from the museum and the First Nation be scheduled to review protocols. Protocols may need to be renewed or re-affirmed on a regular basis to reflect changes within the museum's or First Nation's organization.



## Protocols cont'd...

The scope of each protocol should match the resources and circumstances of the museum and involved First Nation. Neither a museum nor a First Nation should agree to a process that cannot be managed with available staff and resources. Simple agreements, based on common trust, and commitments to work together for mutual benefit may, in some instances, be more effective than complicated policies.

***TIP:***

*For cultural and traditional issues, the First Nation's "authority" may vary according to the issue at hand. A good working relationship with a First Nation will include the identification of a process or individual that is recognized as the First Nation's authority. One or more knowledgeable individuals, usually elders, may be designated as the First Nations' authority. Consultation with First Nations' authorities, as with other experts, may require honoraria or compensation.*



## Topics of Mutual Concern

Following are some of the topics that may be of mutual concern between museums and First Nations, and that can be addressed through protocols:

### Interpretation, Exhibition, Education and Public Programs

Museums and First Nations should recognize and take advantage of their common interests in the development of exhibitions, as well as other types of interpretation programs. Put simply, in order to accurately portray the cultures and histories of First Nations in British Columbia, First Nations should be equal partners in the interpretation process. Such interpretation can occur in all types of public programs that include First Nations topics, such as exhibits, special events (cultural weekends or other programs), education programs for adults and school programs for children, interpretative programs that are developed in conjunction with museum exhibitions and are presented in the museum's galleries (e.g., gallery hosts), publications and more.

Museum policy and practice should include a consultation process with relevant First Nations when developing interpretative programming. The specific process should be developed within the protocol established with a First Nation. In general, the objectives, materials required and desired outcomes for each public program, or suite of public programs, should be developed through partnership with the First Nation. In some instances, a First Nation can provide, or approve, the authority required by the museum for the training necessary for a program. In some instances, First Nations may also be able to provide volunteers for interpretive programs. Utilizing a collaborative approach with First Nations provides benefits to the museum by enhancing accuracy and authenticity in exhibit and interpretive approaches, methods and materials.

### Research

Research involving First Nations materials or topics should be conducted in a collaborative and full-partnership environment. This approach is particularly important where highly sensitive materials such as ancestral remains are involved. In the partnership, matters of culturally appropriate protocol will almost certainly trump issues of science. Several First Nations have policies concerning research conducted in their territories or concerning their history or culture. Museums should determine and understand such policies prior to engaging in research projects that include First Nations' subjects or topics.

#### *TIP:*

*An example of a complex protocol agreement balancing the issues of science and First Nations' cultural concerns is the Kwaday Dän Sinchi agreement worked out between the British Columbia Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture and the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. (Go to: <http://srmwww.gov.bc.ca/arch/kwaday/index.html>)*



## Topics of Mutual Concern cont'd...

Issues addressed in a research protocol agreement can include:

- Constraints on the use of data recorded (e.g., locations of cultural sites; texts, songs, etc.).
- Determination of suitable repositories for the preservation of information and materials generated.
- Permissions necessary for access to materials.

## Legal Requirements

Museum policy and practices must meet the legal requirements of relevant legislation where First Nations interests are involved, especially:

- Heritage Conservation Act (Revised Statutes of BC 1996, Chapter 187)  
[http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/H/96187\\_01.htm](http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/H/96187_01.htm) states any archaeological work that involves the disturbance of cultural materials requires a permit from the Archaeology Permitting Section of the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management.
- Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (Revised Statutes of BC 1996, Chapter 165) [http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/F/96165\\_01.htm](http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/F/96165_01.htm) states violating a person's privacy or using their name or portrait without permission may give cause for legal action.



## Collections

Classes of First Nations' collections may include the following:

- Sacred or culturally sensitive objects.
- Non-sensitive material culture.
- Works of art.
- Songs, recorded interviews/texts.
- Photographs.
- Burial objects.
- Ancestral remains.
- Research results from any of the above collection classes.

## Acquisition

- Cultural sensitivities may exist concerning museum ownership of certain artifacts or classes of collections.
- Cultural concepts of ownership may apply to different classes of materials, and need to be respected (e.g., ceremonial items, songs, texts, etc.).
- Determine that a vendor/donor has the cultural and legal right to transfer an artifact or collection to the museum. Consultation with a First Nation's authority can assist in this process.

## Repatriation

Current ethical standards require that the museum be committed to return certain artifacts or materials, at the request of a First Nation that can demonstrate an historical connection:

- Ancestral remains and burial objects;
- Materials that were acquired by the museum under circumstances that render the museum's claim to ownership problematic;
- Artifacts that are spiritually significant to the community or are considered essential to cultural survival.

The determination of rightful owners or custodians of materials that are designated for repatriation may require a consultative process between the museum and a First Nation. Great care must be taken to ensure that the objects are returned to the rightful owner(s). It may be advisable in certain circumstances for a community museum to seek out expertise from a First Nation's authority, a large museum or university to assist in identifying the rightful owner(s) of an object or objects.



## Collections cont'd...

If the level of documentation identifies only the First Nation, e.g., the Cowichan, a leading elder, or group of elders of the Cowichan or their designate, will probably be the authority. At the level of cultural group, e.g., Haida, the organization that represents all Haida, e.g., the Council of the Haida Nations may have a cultural or elders committee with the mandate and authority to make decisions.

### TIP:

*The authority may vary according to the level of documentation that exists for a particular artifact. If the family of the traditional owner of an artifact is known, the authority will likely be the current title holder from that family.*

## Documentation

Museums should identify and keep on record the names and contacts for appropriate First Nations' communities and/or individuals who are the authorities to contact for guidance concerning First Nations' collections and/or the owners of rights associated with specific artifacts. Such guidance may result in protocols, prescriptions or prohibitions concerning specific artifacts or classes of First Nations' artifacts. Records should be maintained concerning protocols or Procedures, so that they are accessible and up-to-date.

## Storage

Based on advice from First Nations authorities, procedures or specific cultural requirements may be required for the proper and respectful storage of certain artifacts or classes of objects.

## Access

Museums should respect First Nations' right to ready access to materials related to their cultural heritage. Advice from First Nations' authorities may be required to determine if limits should be placed on who may view particular artifacts or classes of artifacts (e.g., some First Nations may wish to restrict access by gender to hunting equipment or by family to certain ceremonial objects). Similarly, concerns may also exist about access to some types of documentation or research results. Concerns or restrictions on access to artifacts, documentation or research materials should be recorded and updated as required.



## **Collections cont'd...**

### **Conservation**

Advice from First Nations authorities may indicate that there are culturally appropriate methods for handling, consolidation or display of artifacts. It may also be necessary to investigate if there are any conflicts between standard conservation techniques and cultural appropriate rituals necessary to maintain or renew the spiritual condition of particular artifacts (e.g., smudging artifacts).

### **Photography/Videography**

First Nations' authorities may advise that permissions are required or that other conditions exist concerning the photography or videography of certain artifacts or classes of artifacts. Documentation concerning such permissions or conditions should be recorded and maintained.



## Loans

### Loans-In

Based on discussions with First Nations, it may be determined that it would be beneficial for certain artifacts or cultural materials to be provided safe storage at a museum or to be loaned to the museum for research, display or interpretation. Such loans can be developed between the museum and a First Nation individual, family or organization. The details of such a loan should be formalized and adequately recorded and should include lists of people with authority for the loan materials. Such formal loans should be reviewed and renewed on a regular basis.

### Loans-Out

In some instances, museums may receive loan requests from First Nations' organizations, families or individuals. These requests may be for display of the artifacts or for their use in cultural/ritual events. In some instances, the borrowers may be members or descendants of the family of the original owners of the artifact in question or the artifact may be something that is needed for an event or ritual. Museums should be prepared to respond to such requests appropriately. Loan requests may need to be discussed with First Nations authorities in order to establish proper loan protocol and process. While recognizing First Nations' needs in loan requests, all parties should also be aware of conservation, security and liability issues. Requests from other museums, art galleries or other institutions or loans of First Nations' artifacts may require consultation with First Nations authorities should there be cultural sensitivities about the artifacts requested.

## Conclusion

Many museums involve First Nations objects and topics in their exhibits and other activities. Museums and First Nations share common interests. Forming partnerships between museums and First Nations provides mutual benefits. Partnership collaborations with First Nations can improve awareness of the important roles First Nations played in the history of British Columbia, as well as in present cultural and other events.

Museums who partner with First Nations may enhance their opportunities of attracting funding and other resources. Museums should identify the First Nations who are involved or represented in their exhibits, research, collections or other activities, and develop protocols with those First Nations. Such protocols can guide the museum and First Nation in the development of exhibitions, public and school programs and research projects. Protocols can also be of assistance in the area of collections management and can address issues concerning acquisition, repatriation, documentation, storage, access, conservation and loans of First Nations' collections.



## Resources

Assembly of First Nations & Canadian Museums Association. *“Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples”*, 1992. A Report jointly sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, Ottawa.

Clavir, Miriam. *“Preserving What Is Valued: Museum, Conservation, and First Nations”*. UBC Press, Vancouver, 2004. 320 pages. Royal British Columbia Museum.

“Aboriginal Material Operating Policy” 2004. Available on-line at:

<http://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/corporateservices/aboriginalmaterialoperatingpolicy-2.pdf>

