



Guidelines for Communities

For the purposes of this document:

- *the term “museum” applies to any institution with collections.*
- *the terms “community” and “community members” refer to tribes and tribal members, as well as Native corporations or any community seeking to collaborate with a museum.*

The following guidelines were developed over a three-year period of collaboration between Native and non-Native museum professionals, cultural leaders, and artists. The Guidelines for Communities are intended as a resource for community members who are working in collaboration with museums. This document is not presented as a set of rules; instead, it offers ideas to consider when working with museums.

Your work with a museum might consist of reviewing the collections to learn what the museum has from your community; sharing information about items from your community that are part of a museum’s collection; helping to develop museum exhibits; or if you are an artist, you might use a museum’s collections for artistic inspiration. These are just a few of the ways you might engage with a museum.

Although the Guidelines may be useful for many kinds of engagement with museums, they are not specifically intended as a resource for Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) consultations.

This document can be printed.

WHY WORK WITH MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS?

Museums can serve as valuable resources for communities. Through meaningful engagement many museums are collaborating with community members to improve their understanding of and care for collections. In recent years, some communities have established long-term relationships with museums that have provided opportunities for

enhancing their own initiatives, while also providing guidance on collections stewardship.

Ultimately, as community members you will determine when and how you wish to interact with museums. Providing communities with access to collections is a fundamental responsibility of museums—and access to collections from your community is your right.

Some benefits of collaborating with a museum may include:

- Reuniting collections with communities.
- Establishing relationships and dialogue based on mutual respect and trust.
- Effecting change in museums.
- Adding to and correcting the information a museum has about its collection.

Depending on the community's priorities, collaboration with a museum can lead to various outcomes including:

- Cultural revitalization.
- Artistic inspiration and arts revitalization.
- Improving a museum's information about its collections.
- Incorporating culturally appropriate care of collections.
- Collaborative conservation.
- Loans for museum exhibits, community-based exhibits, programming, and cultural use of museum collections.
- Providing guidance on exhibit development and planning.
- Providing input to the museum's public programs, including presentations and planning.
- Using new technologies such as 3D imaging.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN WORKING WITH MUSEUMS

Museums have different histories and purposes, and the staff may not have collaborated with communities before. Your experience will vary depending on the museum, its policies and procedures, the purpose of your visit, and the staff involved.

Most museums have a similar plan of organization. In a small museum, one person may be responsible for multiple jobs, whereas in a large museum, responsibilities are divided into different departments.

You will usually work with people in the following positions: Curator, Collections Manager, Registrar, Conservator, Archivist or Director.

Collaborative collections work often takes place where the collections are stored, in the conservation laboratory, or in the archives. These spaces might be in a different building than the main museum.

COLLECTIONS HOUSING

Ideally, collections are kept in clean spaces with controlled temperature, humidity, light, and filtered air. The environment is stabilized to assist in the long-term preservation of collections.

The following rules are typical (Their purpose is to prevent damage to the collections. Exceptions are generally made for cultural practices.):

- Food and beverages are kept out of collection areas to prevent pest infestations.
- Large bags, purses, backpacks, etc. are prohibited to prevent damage to the collections.
- Pencils are used instead of pens because ink is very difficult to remove.

CONSERVATION LAB

The conservation lab is another clean and controlled environment. Conservators are concerned with the science, technology, cultural context and meaning of collections.

Items are brought to the lab for examination, documentation, and, if appropriate, conservation treatment to prevent the item from deteriorating. When community members identify an item as having been made with the expectation that it would eventually deteriorate, conservation treatment may not be appropriate. Increasingly, conservation decision-making, examination, documentation and treatments are carried out in collaboration with community members.

ARCHIVES

People visit archives to find original, historical information about the world, their community and family as well as museum collections. Archivists identify significant cultural and/or historical records for communities and preserve them. Preserved records can include paper documents such as letters, reports and other data, newspaper articles, photographs (plates, negatives, film, prints and digital images), videos (originals and digitals) and much more.

Like collection housing areas, archivists strive to ensure records will be available to future researchers by storing items in climate – controlled spaces in acid-free folders and boxes. To access these unique records, an archive might require you to fill out a form and make an appointment.

GLOVES

Museums have differing policies about wearing gloves when working with collections. In some cases, wearing gloves is mandatory. Gloves protect the items in the collections from your hands' natural oils and may protect you if the items have been treated with pesticides.

THE MUSEUM VISIT

BEFORE

As a first step, you need to establish why you are meeting with the museum staff and what you intend to learn. This is important whether the work has been initiated by you or by the museum. Both museum staff and community members should understand and agree to the results of this first step. Once you agree and have set up a visit, there is still a lot to consider. This can be a complicated logistical process as you are also building a relationship with the museum. This takes time.

You might consider asking these questions when planning your visit:

- Who is the primary museum contact person for arranging the visit?
- How many staff will be participating in the visit? What are their roles?
[Depending on the collections you will be working with, you may want privacy or you may request that more staff be present so you can share information.]
- If invited by the museum, will we be compensated for participation? What expenses will be covered?
- If the institution pays expenses, will we be reimbursed or will the museum be billed directly?
- Where will we be meeting? How will the collections be accessed
[For example, will they be pulled from storage and set on tables in the conservation lab? Or will they be viewed where they are housed?]
- What do we want to see?
[Museum staff may need to pull items for you to view or research, and this takes time and preparation. Let them know what you want to see, even if you can only give them a general idea.]
- What items do we want to avoid? Are there culturally sensitive collections in the building?
[Specify whether you want to avoid certain collection items or types of collections — for example, medicine bundles, funerary items, and/or human remains.]
- What is the proposed schedule for the visit?
[This gives you an opportunity to discuss and negotiate the schedule.]

- Have the collections you will be working with been treated with pesticides? [Historically, many collections were treated with mothballs, or even arsenic, lead, or mercury, to prevent insect infestations. For your safety, museum staff may recommend that you wear gloves and sometimes lab coats while studying some collection items.]
- Can information about the collections be provided to us before our visit? [You can request reports and/or copies of catalog records with images, if available. This documentation gives you an idea of the number of items, what they are, and what they look like.]
- Will the museum want to record [video/audio/photos] the meeting? Will we be asked to sign permission/release forms? What kind of recording is acceptable to me and/or my group? [Request a copy of the permission/release form prior to your visit. If you have any questions or want to edit the form, discuss this with the staff prior to the visit.]
- What forms will I have to fill out? [Such as collections access forms, payment and reimbursement forms, and tax forms; see Addendum II for examples of various forms.]
- What will happen to information about the collections that we share with the museum?

Let the museum know:

- Who in your group will be the primary contact for the museum. If there is a change, inform the museum.
- If you need to spend time alone with specific collections, will require a private space to do so, or plan to make offerings, including burning substances. You may want to discuss how your offerings will be handled by the museum after the visit.
- If you would like a general tour of the museum or would like to see collections outside the project's scope.
- If you want to take photographs and/or record audio/video, and how you intend to use them.
- If non-English speaking community members will be participating in the visit and you will need additional time for translation.
- If people in your group need special assistance, such as a wheelchair.

This is not a complete list of questions or things to consider; you will likely come up with additional questions based on your specific situation.

DURING

Once you have scheduled your visit, you may wish to consider the following:

As the community representative, you might feel pressure from the museum staff to be the overall authority or expert about the collections you are working with, but only you know what knowledge you possess, and what you can and cannot share. It is your right to decline to answer a question or to say “I don’t know.”

It is also your right to tell staff when they should stop any recording (such as video, photographs, audio recording, and notetaking), and whether any information shared during the off-the-record period is private and not to be shared further. You may request a review of notes taken by museum staff before they are entered into the official museum records. This will allow you to make changes or delete information.

If you have never visited the museum before, the experience of seeing collection items from your community may be overwhelming. It is important that you express your needs to museum staff to let them know if:

- you have to cut the day short.
- you need longer or more frequent breaks.
- you need to engage in your own cultural practices, whether alone, with collections, or with staff present.

AFTER

Reflect on the entire experience. Were you satisfied with the visit? If not, do you feel the need to discuss this with museum staff? Are you interested in future visits and/or a long-standing relationship with the museum?

THE COMMUNITY VISIT

Opportunities may arise for museum staff to learn more about the communities from which museum collection items originate. A visit to your community by museum staff allows you to introduce, on your own terms, aspects of your history, culture, and arts that you feel are important to share.

It may be beneficial to consider the following in setting up a visit to your community by museum staff:

- Develop an agenda with the appropriate community members and museum staff.
- Share relevant community policies, cultural protocols, and governance structure.
- Recommend literature and online resources about your community.
- Assist with local travel logistics including directions to the meeting location, and lodging and meal options.

DOCUMENTATION

During your visit to the museum, you will likely share information with staff about the collection items and associated records. Collection records often include catalog records, accession records, and conservation reports. The accuracy and amount of information in collection records varies from one museum to another, from one part of the collection to the next, and from item to item.

When working with museum staff, everything you share during the visit could become part of the museum's permanent records. For example, museum records may include photos taken of you in collections storage areas, a story you shared about a collections item, or a transcript of the audio recording of your meeting with staff. Ask questions and talk with museum staff to reach an agreement regarding access to the information you share and what information will enter the museum record. With your permission, museums might use information and images from your visit for educational, noncommercial purposes such as publications, research, websites, social media, and exhibits.

Museums retain much of their documentation as digital files. Digital technology raises many questions and issues regarding access, ethics, and appropriate uses.

Let the museum know:

- If you want to review and/or edit the information and comments you shared before they become part of the museum's permanent records.
- If you want to restrict any of the information you shared.
- If you want the museum to provide you with copies of the notes, photographs, audio, and video recordings generated during the visit.
- If you plan to make your own recording using video, audio, and/or photos.

If the museum is unable to limit access to parts of its records, this might influence what you decide to share.

For questions or to provide feedback, please contact us at guidelines@sarsf.org.

To access case studies or additional information relating to the Guidelines, please visit www.guidelinesforcollaboration.info.