

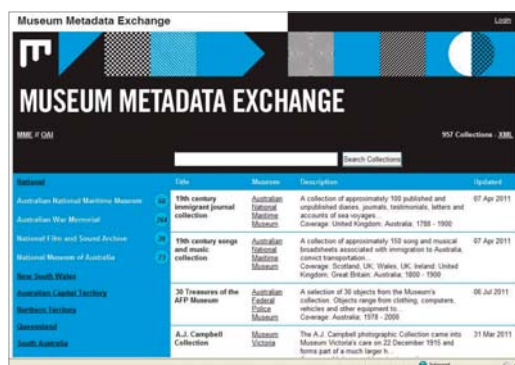
## Unlocking the power of specialist collections

Tim Thwaites, Science in Public

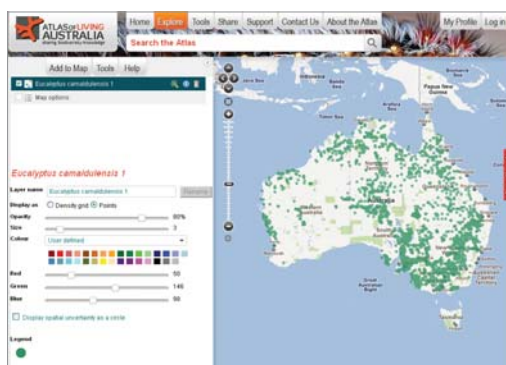
How did ordinary people dress in the 1920s? In standard reference books, the clothing you find tends to be fashion worn by the very rich. It would be like using Vogue magazine as the reference guide for what we're wearing in 2011.

But there is a source of information on the street clothes of the time which is absolutely authentic, if unexpected—crime scene photos. That's why cultural researchers ended up trawling through the archives of the Australian Justice and Police Museum at Circular Quay, which has the world's largest collection of crime scene photographs of the 1920s.

In the past it might have taken creative insight, personal knowledge or word of mouth for researchers to find such a treasure trove of information. In future, they should be able to discover such valuable resources by electronically searching the Museum Metadata Exchange (MME), a database which will provide researchers in the humanities and social sciences (HASS) disciplines with a snapshot of the information housed within Australia's museums that may be of relevance to their specific research projects.



Access to hundreds of collections from museums all over Australia is provided through the MME portal



Atlas of Living Australia, an example of data discovery for the Red River Gum. Image courtesy of Robyn Lawrence, CSIRO

To generate its backbone, 14 significant national, state and regional museums were asked to submit information on about 50 social, cultural, historical or ethnographic collections in their keeping. This was not as simple as it sounds.

"It was a first for many museums," Anderson says. "They're used to working with objects. Everything in a museum is catalogued as a distinct item." But Research Data Australia wanted descriptions of objects grouped together in ways that would be helpful to answer research questions—anything to do with alcohol use in NSW before 1850 or house design in the outback.

The task made museum curators look at their holdings in a new way and already, the museums involved have developed a new understanding of what they hold and how it fits in with the collections of others. Much that was hidden has now been exposed, in a completely new light.

A more developed activity is the Atlas of Living Australia (<http://www.ala.org.au/>), which provides links to the huge variety of information on the organisms inhabiting Australia. For the River

Red Gum, for instance, the Atlas can direct you where to find information on its classification and identification, its biology and ecology, its distribution, and its environmental needs. The Atlas already has associated tools which map the distributions of species, allow you to explore what species can be found in your local area or region, help identify species, and even allow you to submit information of your own.

The MME (<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/museumexchange/>), which is still under construction, is one of an increasing number of discipline-level portals into Australia's rich accumulation of collected information. They include the Australian Ocean Data Network (AODN), the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA), the AuScope Discovery Portal for earth sciences, and the data services of the European Bioinformatics Institute at European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) Australia.

"Until now there hasn't been any attempt to explore the potential of the humanities and social sciences collections in museums," says Margaret Anderson, Chair, Council of Australian Museum Directors and Co-Chair, MME Steering Committee. This project, funded by ANDS, also created a metadata store that feeds automatically into Research Data Australia: the ANDS data portal.

Access to such information was identified as a national infrastructure need and the project has received \$38 million from the Federal Government since 2007. "The interactions between agriculture and other development activities, and native environments are very important for the Federal Government, the state governments, all the way down to catchment and local governments and natural resource management groups," says Donald Hobern, the Director of ALA.

Because ANDS is working to link together these different discipline collections, soon it will be possible to move from an old photo of a platypus-skin cloak, to information about current platypus habitat, to detailed data about its genome. As the number of collections grows, the potential for serendipitous discovery will also increase, allowing more researchers to discover the value of cross-disciplinary data.