

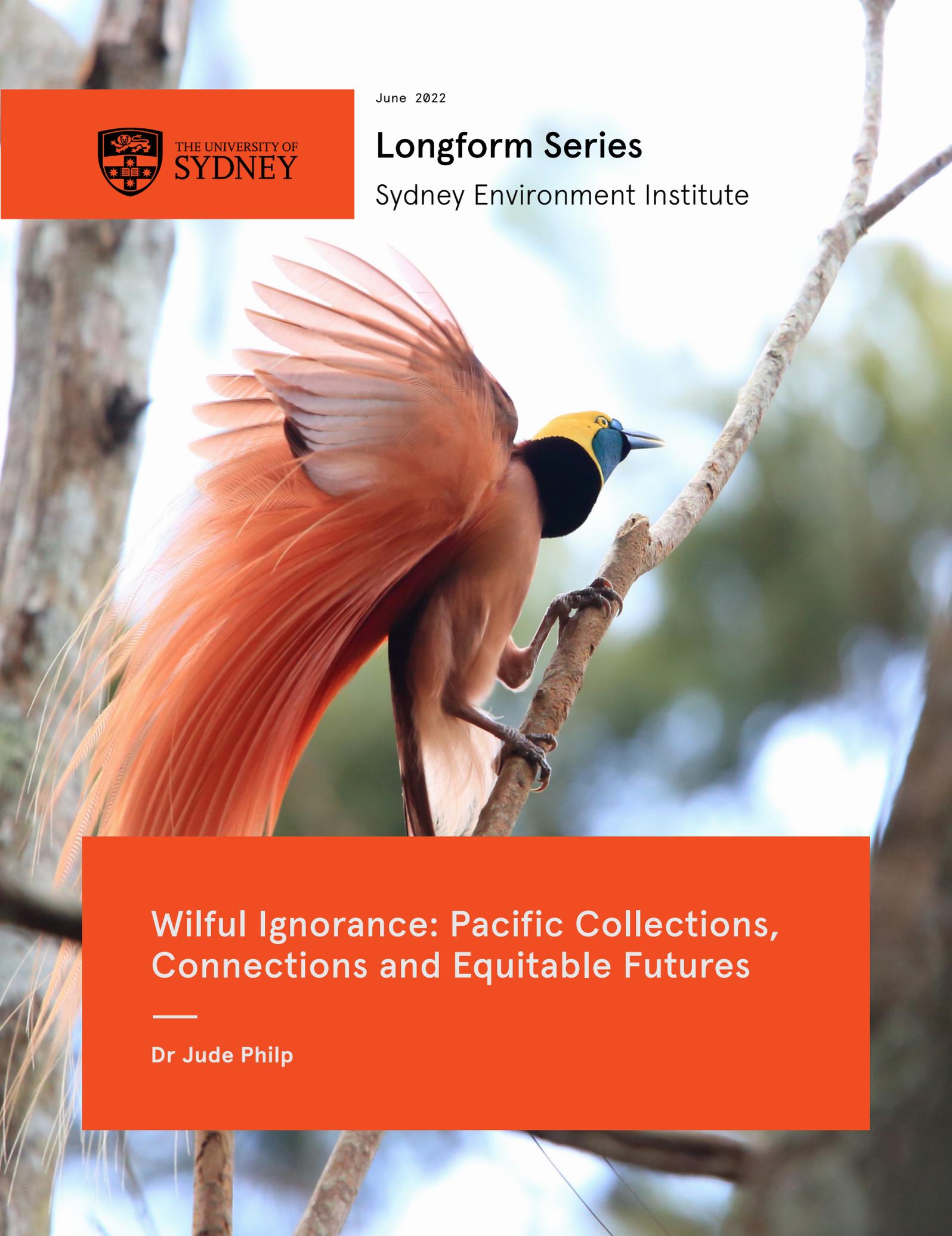
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## Longform Series

Sydney Environment Institute

A photograph of a bird with long, flowing orange feathers perched on a branch. The bird has a yellow head and a blue face. The background is a blurred forest scene.

# Wilful Ignorance: Pacific Collections, Connections and Equitable Futures

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Dr Jude Philp

Wilful Ignorance: Pacific Collections, Connections  
and Equitable Futures

Presented at the Iain McCalman Lecture

24 March 2022

by Dr Jude Philp

The research, events and operations of the Sydney Environment Institute take place at the University of Sydney, on the Gadigal lands of the Eora Nation. We pay our deepest respects to Indigenous elders, caretakers and custodians past, present and emerging, here in Eora and beyond.

The Iain McCalman Lecture celebrates SEI co-founder and former co-director Iain McCalman's dedication to fostering and pioneering multidisciplinary environmental research. The lectures aim to highlight the work of early to mid-career researchers working across disciplinary boundaries to impact both scholarship and public discourse.

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Dharawal man Uncle Lloyd Walker, Papua New Guinea performer Grace Hill and Dr Jude Philip. March 2022. Photography Christopher Wright.

At the start of the lecture Grace Hull, who came to Australia from Vakuta island in the Trobriand Islands of Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea, walked into the Great Hall wearing a bilum woven in patterns of the Papua New Guinea flag, and with her face painted for dance.

On reaching the podium she said: "I stand before with the carvings from my dad he carved in 1977 and his name is Kaitotu Kutanaigu Moses. It was done for Shirley Campbell. Shirley Campbell was in the island of Vakuta doing her studies and my father helped her with her art on the island. Now I stand before you to bring the culture that my father and my uncle Yemesa Kulupwaka told me when I was a little girl. Saying, if you ever go to Australia, or happen to be in Australia, if the Australians ever talk about 'fuzzy wuzzy angles' put your hands up, not just one hand up but two hands up [Here, Grace held up two canoe splashboards, including the one that was given to Shirley by Grace's father]. My uncle was the carrier for Australian soldiers and my dad was the mail boy. He carries the note from one island to another to tell them what's happening. Today I stand here in front of everyone with Jude's presentation here to share the relationship between Papua New Guinea and Australia. Therefore, I will share a little song. That song talks about a wallaby jumping over the borders. 'Let's jump over the border, destroy the barriers that push us away from one another. Lets come together united to help one another, and here's the song...'"

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My thanks, 'kagutoki sogu' to Grace Hull for her work here and her inspiration for this talk, and thanks also to my co-curator of *Pacific Views*, Steven Gagau, who brought Grace and me together and who's also brought many other ideas from across the Pacific into our museum. I acknowledge

your welcome this afternoon, Uncle Lloyd [Walker], and thank you for the lifetime of work, the difficult work that you commit to issues of justice for all of us. Thank you. It is an honour to speak on your land.

Our failure to recognise Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islander philosophies has extensive impact on our current world and our futures. Not least, our treatment of First Nations peoples of our region and country has immediate and detrimental outcomes for all of us.

As stated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, we are part of a shared view, a shared vision, part of this Global South and a oneness of nature and culture.

I'm drawing attention here to both the statement of Mother Nature and this very generous invitation that we walk together.

My talk tonight has three themes: value, black history, and decolonisation.

Geographically, the examples are predominantly drawn from New Guinea, primarily because this continent and that island for the last six of over the last 60,000 years, for 50,000 of them, we're joined as one place. We are not a separate two. We are a continuous one – I would hope to think.

The images that I'm using all come from the Chau Chak Wing Museum collections, and many are drawn from the research of previous generations of researchers at the University of Sydney. It is something to contemplate that most of these works that have come from researchers at the University of Sydney have come prior to the independence of Papua New Guinea. And there was a sharp fall when research was no longer funded through government initiatives, as David drew our attention to, which has brought us to this position of the

difficulties of continuing these links and this work and relationships without that balance of government assistance and work.

The Fly River is at the centre of all my examples, but the themes and ideas could be replicated across the island and across the Pacific. To Kokoda, where hundreds come to remember their ancestors who trialled on paths in common use for centuries. To Milne Bay, where Australians view the remains of the last World War and are greeted by the relatives of those who served alongside Australians as translators, interpreters, medical aids, members of the first Papuan Infantry Battalion, food suppliers and so much else. To Fiji and Aotearoa, once briefly thought of as part of New South Wales, whose citizens worked here as we have worked there.

Few, not even the Australian War Memorial, seems to want to remember World War One. When eager for the participation [in war] against German forces, men left Sydney to take the German New Guinea stronghold of New Britain's rebel. And after that, to bomb the mainland coastal villages in exuberance. Of this war, of these actions, the Australian War Memorial is [almost] silent. The National Museum has only this to say: "Shortly after the outbreak of First World War in 1914, Australian military and naval forces occupied Kaiser Wilhelmsland to prevent it being used as a German naval base.". Full stop.

While, for a period in the 20th century, both before and after the independence of Papua New Guinea, thousands of Australians were employed to colonial ends in the territories of Papua and New Guinea, at this university, historians, geographers, anthropologists, artists, medical students joined in conversation, travelled and joined an analysis of the country and together with its people learnt how to fly – in aeroplanes, at least.

The many connections and relationships is what the idea of wilful ignorance is about, because it seems barely [in] my lifetime that this was not a conversation we needed to have. It now seems an urgent conversation we have to have.

That conversation is led from an inability by our leaders and national centres post-independence to talk in partnership with the people of place, to encourage Australians to realise their Pacific connections beyond the continent's coastlines and slim individual lines of family trees. [To work with, from and] through the work of Fiji and Solomon Islanders to Tahitians, Māori, Aboriginal,

Torres Strait Islander and so many more people across that great ocean.

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If you look at the Pacific Island Museum Association's code and next to it, the British Museum's aims for its collection, it's easy to see how our museums have been moulded from its ancestor. Only 70 odd years separate the foundation of the British Museum and the Australian Museum here in New South Wales. At the heart of the two differences is people. We leave entirely out of the collection the people from whom they are drawn.

Driving interest in New Guinea has always been extraction. Much of it becoming collections in the framework of institutions like the British Museum. Although timber, animals, products of the endless search of gold and minerals and wealth, things made by people, are split, usually between several different institutions never coming together in their philosophical sense. These kinds of European explorations and the tools that they used led to the mapping of the largest river of Papua New Guinea, the Fly River.

Since the 1840s, when the British ships called the *Bramble* and the *Fly* (guess where the name came from), danced around the coastline of the southwest coast of Papua New Guinea, the Fly River has challenged European systems of building, modelling and mapping as our parameters of coasts, islands and depths shift with tidal rushes and the up-river rains. The river flows through the oldest parts of the island, for New Guinea is a place that is geologically continuing to physically grow upwards. It carves a path, this river, through three climactic zones. Three thousand metres above sea level, moist cool forests abound, moving eventually to tropical forested fringes of eucalypt floodplains. And then, finally, into the wet floods, plains and savannah grasslands before the dark green mangrove, forested areas of the vast river mouth, 93 kilometres wide.

This is a river 1,000 kilometres in length, which widens out at the Torres Strait with a river mouth of 93 kilometres. It is intimately connected to Australian peoples and to ecosystems in Zenadth Kes (Torres Strait), to Far North Queensland and the coastal Northern Territory. Through the immense biodiversity of the animals, the Fly River nurtures the ancient stories that connect all of these people and carry them through songs and the actions of people and the knowledge about the world



present, past and future. At its height, the Fly River influences world weather systems. It distributes 12,000 millimetres [of water] annually, which fall into its upper regions, pouring into the seasonal agricultural plains to the east and west through associated river ways. The work of this river is on a planetary scale. Precipitation is part of the system called the Madden-Julian Oscillation.

Barramundi that used to be a lifeblood of this river and also of its people, is an immensely important food and animal that lives in the ecological zone that the freshwater creates. Barramundi were used to determine categories of relationship with other similar species in Australia and were once living in a very luxurious environment. Today, the river is slowly transforming into a waste pit from the extraction of gold and now copper in the Highlands. These fish today forage further and further south away from the metal dense silty sludge that will overflow over the next 100 years and begin to impact the largest seagrass forest in the world and the reefs that support the life around it.

The mines around Ok Tedi have enabled this talk through the copper in the systems in things like this [remote control], and through the immense work of biologists and mathematicians and geographers to model how this mine is in use and how it will affect the people which today forage further and further, like the barramundi, away from the metal-dense sludge. How over the next hundred years it will impact that seagrass and affect the rivers, the floodplains, the deserts, reefs and atolls. The geographies that Craig Santos Perez [*Praise song for Oceania*, 2020] and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner [*Dear Matafele Peinem*, 2014] just signalled in those videos as you were sitting down are intimate, connecting, nurturing places, not just places for extraction.

### I Value

Perhaps, the most undervalued items in any museum collection internationally, of things from the Pacific at least, are arrows and stone tools, so numerous they are bewildering. Mostly, they don't feature in auction catalogues, except for one type of arrow "from the Torres Strait", which continues to attract foreigners. This kind of arrow can fetch up to five [dollars] to 10,000 to 20,000 for a single arrow. Generally, their age is pushed back to the 1860s, to the time before there were Europeans to this golden idea of people who did not have change, who never changed or accompanied others.

But as Bilai Laba, who's a Bine historian from Port Moresby, has talked about – these arrows with their tiny sculptural faces (called 'le-op' in the Torres Strait region where they're traded) could well be markers of their [Bine] connections to Indonesians from the centuries and centuries before when things, 'tulik' (iron) and 'buk' (paper), were brought to the region. In the first meetings with Murray Islanders [when collections went into] the Australian Museum in the 1830s, people held up turtle shell asking for tulik. The Europeans on board assumed that this was a pure commercial exchange. "They want iron." "We want a turtle shell." "Maybe we'll get some other goodies like these arrows if we add in some cloth, or maybe we could add in some beads or glass." They did not realise that the tulik was an old word, was a word that did not come from Murray island, but from far away in the Indonesian archipelago, and that these things, perhaps like cloth, were long time negotiating objects, which people exchanged one to another to form partnerships, relationships and ideas of personhood.

There's another way of looking at this beyond the commodities of exchange-iron, which I just alluded to [and that is that] – these were also gifts that returned [to museums] entwined in objects used to sing and dance, like the small red cloth that was tied to the cassowary arm-band ornaments. Writing for the British Museum, Josh Bell brought forward this kind of connection from a pearl shell similar to this one. With it, the London Missionary Society missionary James Chalmers, or Tamate, was able to reach into the Gulf province of Papua New Guinea. The memory of this connection through Imu, the then Hanuabada-based daughter of Ipai Vai'i, is maintained by the community alone, not by Western scholarship until Josh wrote it down. Along with the name of that Chalmers gave the pearl shell that is still in that village 'Aime Tamate'. However, the connections through which Chalmers acquired the Pearl Shell are silent. It was *his* shell, Aime Tamate, no one else's. Yet, evidently was carved and presented to him, probably in a situation like this view of Mabuig Island from the Torres Strait, where he was also assigned to deliver the message the message of the Gospels.

This is value differently wrought from the pearl shells that were dredged in their tens of thousands for overseas commodities, for buckles and belts and buttons and ornaments into other sorts of ideas, a commercial system that almost rivalled sheep wool at one stage, so large was the

“Numbers that are used in museums to calculate the values of arrows, to calculate the values of drums and to calculate the values of birds. These market values are also something that really make objects out of the reach of their descendants.”

— Dr Jude Philp

Unnamed Fly River estuary settlement. HP84.60.245.  
Donated by Burns, Philp & Co. 1984.



amount of pearl shells dredged from the Torres Strait.

Valuable items for us can be a way to wealth, the freedom to be dictating alliances rather than to be forced to forge alliances. Monetary value for museums depends not on people and relationships, although they can be used to increase certain kinds of values. A spear, for instance, appropriated by Cook from Kamay Bay, can have a value in the hundreds of thousands, not the \$1 an item that is usually given to audit collections of these kinds of spears and arrows carefully crafted, worked, used, danced with for centuries. Muam and Sido, the great ancestors of the region, have little bearing on the values. These ancestors gave rise to agriculture, to the relationships between plants, animals and the people who populate the region. But at market value, neither ancestors nor animals have relevance. In fact, in most cases, it's illegal to trade in the animals. So there is no market value that we can audit the insects, the birds, the mammals in our care. They are hugely of a different kind of economic value to a painting such as this [work hanging in the Great Hall] of Marie Bashir.

## II Black history

Agriculture is old in this part of the world. Another of those centres working differently with the resources of land that arose at the end of the last Ice Age in northern Asia, China and in the Near East. Here in Papua New Guinea, people modified plants such as bananas upwards of 30,000 years ago to make them sweet, transportable foodstuffs. Tracing their origins through DNA rather than people, botanists have traced the species back and forth from the Asian mainland and in island archipelagos across the Pacific, back and forth to Africa. These are not plants that move themselves. These are only plants that move with people. It is the plants that we have the history of.

From wet to dry season, agricultural practice that saw people move from the coast to inland, for seasonal practice, cultivators working to transform areas of the forest into vast gardens of sugar cane, coconut, greens and tubers, while others worked in swampy areas on the difficult work of sago production. Men and women who use the ecological knowledges of connections to foster birds of paradise's dancing trees and the birds that would perform within them were nurtured. People who recognise the relationships between the lizards, the worms, the ants and beetles in their different

ecological settings; between the fish, the birds and the mammals that fed upon those other things and between themselves. Yet today we continue the practice of someone like Ben Boyd, who first brought slaves to the Australian economy in the 1840s. (Of the 192 men, 60 managed to get back to Sydney, walking from Eden to find assistance to return home.)

Today, fruit pickers could be urban travellers from London or seasoned agriculturalists from Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji and elsewhere. They are only employed to extract, not to lend their considerable knowledge to the farming practices they're employed by. To return to Tarisi Vunidilo, the secretary general of the Pacific Island Museum Association... In her recent talk, she said, quite clearly, "culture and nature are one for our people in the Pacific".

In researching arrows of the Fly River region from Sir William McGregor's colonial work between 1888 and 1898, it became apparent to me that while bows were personal and very intimate things made in the shape and the weight of the person who would use them, arrows circulated widely through trade, through aggression, through defence and through ceremonially wrought relationships underwritten by the ancient ancestors, Sido, Muam and others. While travelling up rivers in steam ships, Europeans of the 19th century wrote of men declaring their animosity and the claim of their lands, who appeared on riverbanks clothed in feathers covered with shell beads, each declaring hostile intent through the symbolism not realised by the viewers, painted with ochres and colours of their land and bearing arrows and drums. These drums are another value of European interest falling into the area of a sculptural work. Yet these can be dangerous things, as their association with warfare shows, they were potent, purposeful, sometimes in ancestrally inhabited works of power.

## III Decolonising the museum

Mostly, they (drums) are impotent in museum collections devoid of their tympanums like this one, either because of negligence or care or deliberate removal. They can no longer sing. They're also devoid of their dress: the feathers and the forest plants that were woven into their structures that connected them with the people who use them and with the powers of the animals of the sea and the sky. The Macleay is particularly wealthy in these things, which we catalogue as sound-producing instruments:

Drums. Patently, they are neither of those things now.

To return to the opening slide, renaming, rethinking the history of the things in a museum doesn't mean we need to remove the history of the family who acquired this [telescope], of the Battle of Trafalgar it was supposedly used at or at the World War One incidences out in Camden where they looked at the southern skies. But it does mean a change in emphasis. It foregrounds the knowledge that was here when such objects and histories became part of this place. Just as drums misnamed in museum collections, being now almost skeletons of their former selves, so too are the animals that we have divorced from the places of their culture. These were once the animals that animated things like the drums. Worn in headdresses, listened to in forests, eaten at certain periods, these [birds] are part and parcel of all of those cultural objects that you've seen before, but they are differently and wildly differently named.

I can't even pronounce the *Myristicivora spilorrhoea* which Grey of the British Museum named in 1858 after a specimen that Alfred Wallace got in the Aru islands. In Meriam-mir it is called Duamar and way apart on the north coast of Papua New Guinea in Tuapota [language], there is a much fuller reference to what it can mean: to do something like that pigeon – me gabubu; to be a young pigeon – idiwa; wainadi a middle aged gababu and gwaremom an old one. We have one name and there is a richness that we could adopt.

Our museums use numbers prolifically as judgements of what is successful and what is not successful, as judgements of how to understand an object and its place in a museum and an exhibition over another object. Here [on this chart] are measures of success. Popular exhibitions of Europe, one from Oceania, but the list is silent of the Pacific. How does anybody become to know, become to appreciate this kind of rich diversity of place if we are constantly, continuously fed the same kinds of stories? The same small body of Tutankhamen forever propelled around the world of certain kinds of modern art and other ways of understanding ourselves. Necessary parts of understanding ourselves, but without a balance to the Southern Hemisphere. Without a balance to the Global South.

Numbers that are used in museums to calculate the values of arrows, to calculate the values of drums and to calculate the values of birds. These market values are also

something that really make objects out of the reach of their descendants. But they are also sometimes a way of being able to claim back for the descendants something of great importance. In this case, the central figure Ku Ka 'Illi Moku, from Hawai'i, was bought at an auction for a ridiculously large sum of money and then given back to Hawai'i. But most of those objects are not. Most of them are set for "decorating gentlemen's rooms" (as the sale of the arrow went), or for putting in glorious halls.

Museums do form an important function of trying to bring back some of these things for a more useful purpose. But we must be aware of these bizarre calculators of value that impact also on the work that we do. On what we can conserve and what we can't conserve, what we can afford to conserve, what we can't afford to conserve or we can exhibit, what we shouldn't – and all of these kinds of decisions that fall in part upon these economic values.

These kinds of animals, without which we would all be dead (for insects are the thing that joins us all together and unites us on this earth), these are generally valued at not even a dollar a pop. Mostly, they are unknown. We cannot afford the research that would go towards someone going out to Papua New Guinea, looking at a particular place, looking at this collection of beetles and working out, do they still exist? Has the mine of Ok Tedi completely destroyed the species or not?

This is not research that is funded. Yet these are an incredibly potent aspect of people's lives, of their agriculture and other work as Sophie Chao's work has some shown in West Papua, particularly recently for SEI.

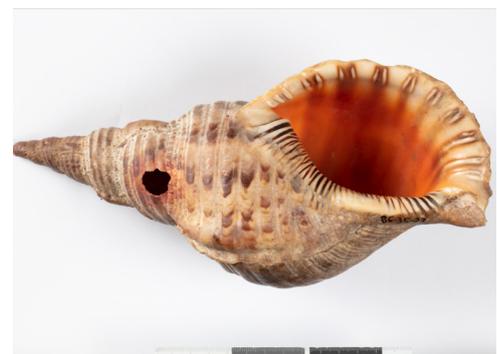
So many of the objects that are from Papua New Guinea are naked either of their connections to people or devoid through age treatment, or deliberate removal of the things that made them rich and wealthy. Of sea eagles like this in their call, of the eggs that are like pearl shells in some languages. Of, as one student of Leah Lui-Chivizhe's wrote, a plate that was handled by Samoan servants in Robert Louis Stevenson's house, those plates are also devoid of the hands that worked with them, that scrubbed them and cleaned them, looked after them, and we are devoid of that relationship. We're also separated in the languages that we use for particular things like shells. While work continues to populate databases with the words of the thousands of languages just from our region.



HP81.010.183 Star Album Macleay Collections CCWM c1870.

“How does anybody come to know, come to appreciate this kind of rich diversity of place if we are constantly, continuously fed the same kinds of stories?”

– Dr Jude Philp



Above, clockwise from left – ‘Fly River arrows’. HP87.1.96. NHB.1878.a; Mounted specimen. *Myristicivora spilorrhoea* (Grey 1858). Male. 23 July 1875. Bet Island, Torres Strait; *Charonia tritonis* (Linnaeus 1758) made into a trumpet. Ali island, Sandaun Province, PNG ET86.35.23.

“...seeking responsible solutions to climate change and habitat loss through the knowledge of people who have lived in this environment for far longer, have straddled the relationship with a globalised world and know how to balance the oneness of culture and natural need.”

— Dr Jude Philp

We are less comfortable with the words for animals. While there are highly complex issues of localised taxonomies, they are no less complex than the European system of relationship through evolutionary connection that determines our relationship currently with nature.

Most importantly, this work could bring us closer to the Pacific Island Museum Code, recognising that the things we look after, as a need to recognise the people who inform those things today and seeking responsible solutions to climate change and habitat loss through the knowledge of people who have lived in this environment for far longer, have straddled the relationship with a globalised world and know how to balance the oneness of culture and natural need.

If it seems too gargantuan a task to do, remember our own history where through the networks of trade and commerce, museums pulled the millions of different forms of life into institutions across the world in just 100 years or so.

Over 300 years Europeans (predominantly) gave them names and continue to give them names to form the systems by which descendants of Northern Hemispheres people and knowledge know the world in its entirety. And consider again the 50,000 years, and more, in which people of this region learnt, studied, cultivated their places. And the great possibility that comes from two-way respectful relations and common understanding when you draw upon this kind of deep, deep knowledge.

In closing, I'd like to thank the people in the Torres Strait and in Papua New Guinea who patiently educated me. I'd like to thank my family too, who even more patiently educated me over a longer period and the immense numbers of researchers, biologists, chemists, historians, anthropologists,

archaeologists, biologists, museum workers, geologists, geographers, musicologists and so many others who work with the people of Papua New Guinea and through whose work have made this talk possible.

Thank you for listening and to the Sydney Environment Institute for continuing to challenge our ideas and to think of better ways to do things. Thanks.

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This page - Dharawal man Uncle Lloyd Walker, Papua New Guinea performer Grace Hull, Dr Jude Philp, SEI co-founder Iain McCalman, and SEI co-founder and Director David Schlosberg. March 2022. Following page - Dr Jude Philp presenting the 2022 Iain McCalman Lecture. Photography Christopher Wright.

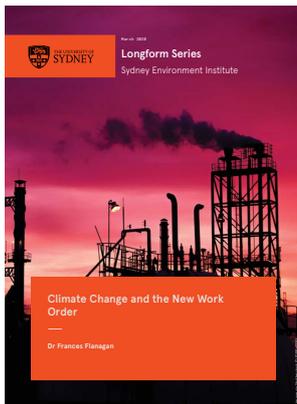


### **Dr Jude Philp**

#### **Macleay Collections, Chau Chak Wing Museum**

Dr Jude Philp is a museum-based anthropologist and senior-curator of the Macleay Collections at the Chau Chak Wing Museum. Over the past 20 years her exhibition and research work has been directed towards understanding the cultural and social circumstances under which animals and peoples' objects were collected for museums in the 19th century.

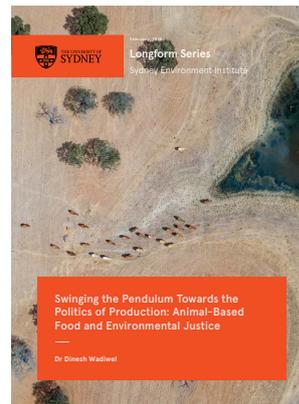
Committed to stimulating research into the collections, and increasing the purposefulness of museums holdings, her research output includes the recent publication of the Torres Strait and New Guinea journals of Alfred Haddon Recording Kastom (SUP, 2020), exploitation of scientific and historical methodologies to reveal the histories of animal specimens (ARC Merchants and Museums) and renegotiating histories of colonial British New Guinea through a Government collection of 13,000 items (ARC Excavating MacGregor).



March 2020

—  
Climate Change and  
the New Work Order

Dr Frances Flanagan



April 2020

—  
Swinging the Pendulum  
Towards the Politics of  
Production: Animal-  
Based Food and  
Environmental Justice

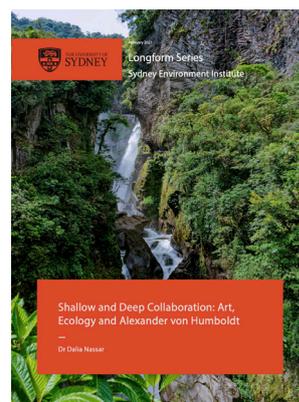
Dr Dinesh Wadiwel



December 2020

—  
Fouling / Concreting /  
Artmaking: Three Habits  
of an Encrusting Ocean

Dr Killian Quigley



February 2021

—  
Shallow and Deep  
Collaboration: Art,  
Ecology and Alexander  
von Humboldt

Dr Dalia Nassar

[sei.sydney.edu.au/publication-type/longform-essay](https://sei.sydney.edu.au/publication-type/longform-essay)

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