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# Australian Museum guts staff, putting priceless artefacts at risk: union

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## Exclusive

Tough time: Australian Museum chief executive Kim McKay with Malagan masks from Papua New Guinea. *Photo: Wolter Peeters*

The NSW government has been accused of abandoning the state's scientific heartland and putting priceless artefacts at risk as the Australia Museum guts its staff in a round of voluntary and forced redundancies.

Australia's oldest natural history museum has wiped out one-third of the permanent full-time equivalent employees, including all in-house security guards and several highly skilled research staff, the Public Services Association said.

Of the museum's roughly 150 full-time equivalent employees, 50 jobs have been axed, amounting to more than 1000 years of scientific and historic expertise at the museum, the union said.

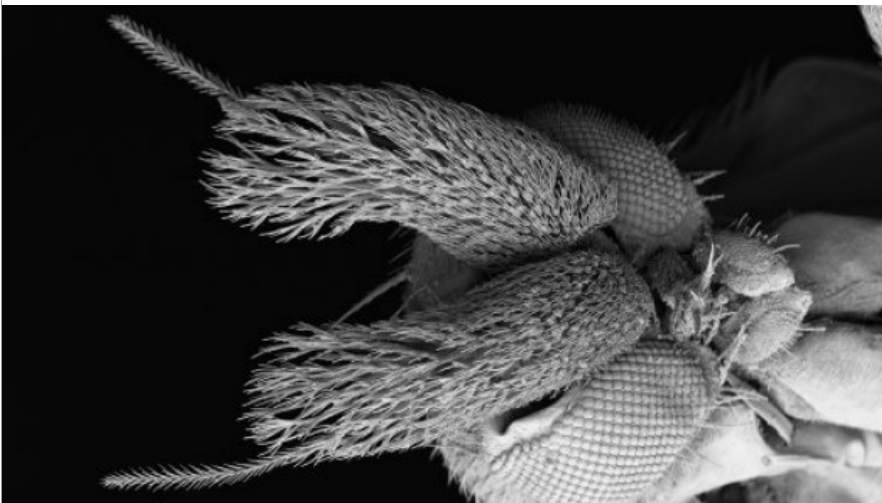


The hawaiian feather cape presented to Captain Cook in 1778 and held at the Australian Museum. *Photo: Australian Museum*

Museum management have disputed these figures, saying the FTE workforce was 206, which amounts to a loss of almost one quarter of staff through redundancies.

Staff have expressed grave concerns for the museum's extensive collection that houses historic artefacts valued at \$750 million and priceless national heirlooms, such as Captain Cook's cape, following the removal of all in-house security staff.

The protection of these coveted objects will be handed to contractor security guards.



A scuttle fly captured via the Australia Museum's Scanning Electron Microscope *Photo: Sue Lindsay (Australia Museum)*

"The government very clearly has targeted science and scientists in its decimation of the NSW public sector in recent years and now is turning its attention to the protectors of some of the most precious pieces of this country's physical history," union general-secretary Anne Gardiner said.

"The tragedy is that this latest decision to cut even more public sector jobs will probably cost more than maintaining the existing positions," Ms Gardiner said.

"The question must be asked, 'What exactly does the Baird government value?'



Australian Museum chief executive Kim McKay will reappoint a palaeontologist to the museum's research team. *Photo: Janie Barrett*

"It's certainly not experienced public sector workers or their jobs. Nor, it seems, does it hold the country's history in any great regard," she said.

On Tuesday, forced redundancies claimed 12 staff members.

It is understood that among the staff who were hit by forced redundancies was the head of the production unit, one of the museum's librarians and the head of the scanning electron microscope lab used extensively in the museum's scientific research.

At a meeting with the union on Wednesday, up to 40 staff members backed a vote of no-confidence in the museum's senior management.

A senior researcher who spoke on the condition of anonymity said staff feared management were turning the museum into a "theme park".

"We're just devastated to see what this place is becoming," the researcher said.

"If we lose this expertise we'll never get it back."

The Australian Museum chief executive Kim McKay said fears over the safety of artefacts was unfounded, noting the shift to external security contractors was in step with other Australian cultural institutions.

Ms McKay said management had cut 13 per cent of a 380-strong workforce of full-time, part-time and casual and short term contract employees to rein in its salary spending, which has exceeded the state government's funding cap for labour.

"It's a very tough time for them and for everyone at the museum, including those of us who have had to make these terrible decisions. It's an awful situation especially when these are our colleagues and friends," Ms McKay said.

"But we have to cope with our budget the best way we possibly can and operate within our government [funding]," she said.

None of the museum's research scientists were made redundant, Ms McKay said.

In September, Ms McKay announced that the museum had eliminated a \$745,000 deficit as it prepared to reveal a \$5.9 million makeover.

"We can't have this level of change and growth program without there being some change in the way in which you operate," she said.

A spokesman for NSW Arts Minister Troy Grant said there had been no recent changes to funding levels and no directive from the government to cut jobs.

"It is the museum's job to manage its budget as it sees fit," the spokesman said.

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