

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the political, strategic, economic, social and cultural aspects of Australia's relationship with the Republic of Indonesia.

This submission is to inform the Joint Standing Committee about the Australian National Maritime Museum's ongoing interests in Australia's relationship with the Republic of Indonesia. The museum, a national cultural institution, is a Commonwealth Statutory Authority reporting to the Minister for the Arts, The Hon Rod Kemp MP.

Broadly, the museum enhances Australians' awareness and understanding of aspects of Indonesian history and culture through exhibitions, publications and activities focussing on maritime-mediated relations between the two neighbouring countries, past and present, and on the cultural exchanges arising from these links.

- The museum has a permanent display relating to the largely pre-European maritime contacts between Indonesia and Aboriginal societies, when fleets from Makassar in Sulawesi made annual voyages (1600s–1907) to northern Australian coasts to collect seafood delicacies including trepang (*Holothurian* sp.) for trade with China. These Moslem traders made the first regular non-Indigenous settlements of Australia that can be detected through archaeological and historical records. A Makassan-style Yanyuwa dugout canoe from the Gulf of Carpentaria, displayed in our Indigenous gallery, reflects technological exchanges with visiting Indonesian seafarers.
- The museum's collection also represents contemporary visits to Australian waters by traditional Indonesian fishermen from Roti and Madura (inter alia). The museum displays at its wharves a lateen-sail *perahu lete lete* from the Madurese island of Raas as an example of traditional sail-powered craft which still make these voyages. The 15-metre long craft was purchased in 1987.
- The museum has a collection of contemporary fishing equipment confiscated by the Australian Customs Service from fishermen now deemed to be illegal intruders, since Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone expanded in the 1970s into waters they had traditionally exploited. This is an area not just of historical interest but one with ongoing political and humanitarian sensitivities.
- The social relations between Aboriginal societies and visiting Makassan seafarers, and their influence on Aboriginal languages, arts and economy, were represented in a 1997 temporary exhibition *The Welcoming of Strangers*, based on the bark paintings of noted Ganalbingu artist John Bulun-Bulun.
- A major temporary exhibition in 1998–99, *Lamalera – Whale hunters of Indonesia*, was an ethnological study of a unique maritime society in Eastern Indonesia which today carries out the last truly subsistence whale fishery in the world. It was opened by the Indonesian Ambassador to Australia. A photographic exhibition in 2001, *Noah's Art – Maritime arts of Madura*, based on field research by a museum staff member, was introduced by the Indonesian Consul General.

- Staff research and collecting activities in Indonesia have been the subject of papers and articles in scholarly and popular publications, and of public and members' lectures at this and other museums. In the course of these activities, staff-to-staff contacts have been made with a number of museums in Indonesia.
- The museum has developed and led guided cultural/history tours to Indonesia, visiting maritime and related communities, for its own members and the members of other Australian museums. Our customers on these tours have benefited from increased understanding and enjoyment of, and empathy with, Indonesian people and their cultures.

Discussion

It is significant that, since the deterioration in Australian-Indonesian relations which this Inquiry addresses, the market for the museum's Indonesian tours – i.e. mature, well-educated museum members – has collapsed. This reflects not just anxieties about the level of instability in Indonesia, but also about how Australian visitors will be received there.

Museums – particularly those with a social history approach that focuses on the people and cultures behind events, like the Australian National Maritime Museum – can play a significant role in educating Australians about their nearest neighbour in ways that counteract misunderstandings and stereotypes. They do this through a variety of means, including exhibitions, lectures, publications, and not least by initiating people-to-people contacts and understanding.

There could be additional benefits if resources were available for Australian museums to work with and support their counterparts in Indonesia. Indonesian museums are chronically under-resourced, and would benefit immensely from any aid that came to them in areas such as collection management and conservation.

These benefits would spread to Indonesian museum-goers if resources were extended to include projects designed to assist Indonesian museums to develop exhibitions that dealt with links between Australia and Indonesia in the past and present, in positive ways. These are topics essentially unknown to most Indonesians.

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