The cultural sector has a responsibility to make sure that there is adequate access to information in isolated areas. In 2017, I was fresh to the sector and on my way to completing my Master of Museum and Heritage Practice through Victoria University of Wellington. After completing the theory part of the course, I undertook a practical internship in Arthur’s Pass Village, located in the Southern Alps, roughly between Christchurch and Greymouth. With a personal draw to the outdoors, a growing appreciation for natural heritage, and a role that worked with a collection, this felt like a great fit.

When first approached about the internship opportunity I tried to recall anything Arthur’s Pass related. I had a brief memory of a trip I made a decade ago with my family. The only aspect of the trip I could remember was that of our dog seeing snow for the first time. While this was an amusing experience, it didn’t leave me with much to go on regarding my upcoming internship, so I approached the internship with a fair amount of apprehension.

This apprehension was unfounded. When I turned up, sweating thanks to the non-airconditioned drive in my old Nissan, I was warmly welcomed and put at ease by the Arthur’s Pass Visitor Centre staff. I was promptly shown to my accommodation for the coming four months—a DOC Lodge, a well-insulated but internet less building which was only a ten-minute scenic walk from work. Overall, an excellent spot to hang my hat.

After moving in my bags, I returned to the visitor centre to be shown my new work area and the incredible seventy years’ worth of collected material I would be working with. The first thing that became apparent was the interest and investment the community had in their heritage. This had already shown itself through the initial push to acquire an intern to work with the collection. Passionate community
members lobbied for action to be taken regarding the historic material held within Arthur’s Pass National Park. Members of the community and the Department of Conservation felt very strongly about the need to keep the information in the visitor centre and so prioritised this project to see it retained. This project was fast tracked due to the complete refit of the Visitor Centre that is scheduled for the second half of 2018. With everything being moved out of the visitor centre and the future of the building being uncertain, the community and the workers wanted to put emphasis on the archive to ensure no knowledge was lost.

The project that was originally put forward was to catalogue the Arthur’s Pass Visitor Centre collection which included the accumulation of seventy years of stored items and the remnants of the Alpine Museum. In 1959, the building was constructed as an Alpine Museum but quickly grew to incorporate providing information services to Park visitors and facilitating a base of operations for Park Rangers. My role quickly began to expand to incorporate being an advocate and advisor for all things

Arthur’s Pass Visitor Centre. Photo supplied by author.
museum and heritage. With this abrupt entry into the professional Museums world, I quickly saw how connected the local community was to their heritage and culture.

This close relationship with heritage was shown through the countless visitors I had while undertaking this project. From the community, I had historians, past workers and current employees seeking information for both work and personal reasons. The information helped with histories being written and interpretation walks being constructed. Every week I had people from the public asking for information on various aspects of the park's heritage. Many times, I was told that this material was priceless and was assured of its value. So what would happen if the material was moved off-site or was no longer immediately available? The people that would be most likely to want the information, the community, would have to travel to obtain it or put an order in and wait a designated amount of time. These barriers are what creates an initial rift between rural areas and their access to information.

From this spawned a sense of responsibility to retain the information in the visitor centre and make it accessible. Previously, all the information in the Visitor Centre was stored in a small upstairs room or dispersed through various filling cabinets. This made finding the useful information time-consuming and impractical. I began by...
attempting to catalogue the collection and have it searchable for the public by using the online cataloguing platform “ehive”. Each item would be given an individual number, title, and location to allow for a quick search. This enabled the community to see what the visitor centre held and allowed for future projects or general and general research needs.

This also tied in nicely with a proposed research room in the visitor centre’s new layout. The allocation of a space in the proposed re-design designates a clear area for people to go to research different Arthur’s Pass related topics. This brings the collection out from behind closed doors and reduces barriers to access and, hopefully, increases the usability of the information. By making information public, people visiting the area could acquire relevant information while in the environment, which provides context. This system also allows for non-local researchers to be aware of what is held in Arthur’s Pass before making the two-hour journey from the major urban centre of Christchurch to Arthur’s Pass Village.
Devil's Punchbowl Waterfall. Photo supplied by author.
Complications immediately popped up due to having increased access to the collections with supervision and extra handling being factored into maintaining the collection. Making the information more useable also puts this information in more physical danger as it is handled by more people increasing the chance of damage. More financial resources must be put towards the collection, resources that are not usually available. Unsure of how to proceed I decided to try and make the maintenance of the collections as efficient as possible by providing descriptive guidelines for the collection. This, in theory, would make a worker’s time more efficiently used, and the items could continue to be looked after adequately. After compiling these ‘how to’ lists I showed them to the staff and walked them through the key aspects. This was all in the hope that after I left, the visitor centre staff could continue to effectively maintain the collection. Optimising efficiency is essential when promoting access to information in areas with limited resources.

Looking down Arthur’s Pass from Mt Bealey. Photo supplied by author.
Throughout my internship I also discovered the huge range of items held at the visitor centre. Between myself, the Department of Conservation, and the community we managed to create a scope to better encapsulate the collection parameters. This led to information not relevant to Arthur’s Pass being distributed to where it was more applicable. From this, the visitor centre can focus on only the relevant information and reduce waste of resources. Without emphasis being placed on heritage there is the potential for future projects to be lost. While the focus on heritage was encouraged by the community, there was resistance regarding distribution of irrelevant information. Not wanting to be disconnected from their information, the community established a triple check system involving staff, historians and long-standing locals to check items in question for their significance to conclusively decide what information was relevant. With these discussions taking place, there was always an understanding within the community that this was important and useful work.

While these small reactions help, there is still a long way to go to making accessible information efficient and achievable in isolated areas. I am still trying to think of ways to make it work with minimal resources and I have learnt through my internship that sharing ideas is the best way to come upon solutions. In this, I am confident that the community will continue to think of inventive ways to maintain their collection. Even after being in the area for only six months I feel a strong connection to the place and will continue to, long after I have left. Due to this, I can say with confidence that my opinions regarding Arthur’s Pass are very biased as I seek to promote Arthur’s Pass Village having access to their information. The connection I now have to this location has given me further conviction of the need to make local archives accessible in local centres for local communities. Rural areas often get forgotten when it comes to discussions regarding museums and heritage and I believe that they should be a big part of these conversations. My whole experience has reinforced, in my mind, that the cultural sector has a responsibility to provide suitable access to information in rural areas.