



A PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION PRIMER

A broad, collection-wide preventive conservation strategy can benefit hundreds or even thousands of objects. The activities involved in preventive conservation are not always the most glamorous tasks, but they are vital for ensuring the long-term survival of collection materials. Many of these activities are interrelated.

ENVIRONMENT

A good collections environment involves maintaining acceptable temperature and humidity levels, limiting light exposure, and removing gaseous and particulate pollutants from the air. An effective environmental control program also includes routine monitoring of the environmental conditions and regular heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system maintenance. Controlling the environment in which objects are displayed and housed will slow down deterioration processes. It is a critical step that will continuously help the preservation of the entire collection.

Providing environmental controls (temperature, relative humidity, and light) is one of the greatest single steps an institution can take in preserving their collections. In recent years there has been some shifting in the conservation community away from stringent temperature and environmental requirements for collections materials. The focus has moved toward creating environmental conditions that are attainable and cost effective for institutions to maintain in the long-term, accompanied by careful environmental monitoring and data analysis. However, for the long-term care of the collections, ideal environmental conditions are still recommended at 65 degrees Fahrenheit and 45% relative humidity. The most important consideration is to strive for an environment without extreme fluctuations.

HOUSINGS, STORAGE, AND SPACE

Good quality storage materials (sleeves, folders, and boxes), appropriate storage furniture (including shelving, cabinets, rolled storage, and flat files), and adequate room for objects to be stored and accessed are of huge importance to the long-term preservation of collections materials. The appropriate styles and sizes of storage enclosures should be selected according to the type of collections present.

Collections storage spaces should be large enough that collections are not stored in cramped or unsafe conditions. There should also be room for staff members to move safely within a storage space; this is necessary for safety of both staff members and collection items. Physical accessibility is vital in implementing a regular housekeeping program, an integrated pest management program, and in effective disaster response and collections salvage.

PEST MANAGEMENT

The best way to stop pests from damaging collection materials is to prevent them from having the opportunity to cause the damage. An integrated pest management (IPM) program involves a regular collection-wide monitoring program, recording and identifying any pests found, and using eradication procedures appropriate to the specific pest and infested materials. IPM focuses on using pesticide-free methods to deal with pests, such as controlling the climate, food sources, and building entry points. Any IPM program should be

developed or reviewed by a pest management consultant who has experience working with cultural collections and appropriate eradication techniques.

HOUSEKEEPING

A good, systematic housekeeping program should be a priority because clean storage and exhibition areas significantly aid in the long-term preservation of collections.

Regular housekeeping and stack maintenance allow staff to constantly monitor the state of the collections. A consistent housekeeping program is also a good opportunity to identify objects and collections that might need improved storage or conservation treatment and to identify possible concerns with the building itself.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Collections management policies provide a foundation and framework for consistent and systematic collections care. Topics that are vital to the care of the collections include the following: accessions, deaccessions, loans, insurance, security, handling and access, and exhibitions. All policies should be reviewed and consistently updated to reflect any changes in collections management and staffing.

Preservation awareness training is an important component of policy development and implementation. Even the best policies are ineffective if staff do not know about the documents, understand their purpose, and work toward consistent implementation.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

In response to natural disasters and terrorism threats, many institutions are rethinking their vulnerabilities, heightening security procedures, and reassessing their recovery and continuity of operations plans. In addition to large-scale disasters, collections may be in danger due to smaller emergencies such as roof and pipe leaks, pest infestations, mold blooms, theft, or fire. During construction or renovations, the risks to the collections increase dramatically due to systems failures, burst pipes, fire hazards, security breakdowns, and accumulation of dust and dirt. Preparedness is essential for quick response and recovery and to lessen the extent of damage or loss of collections materials.

An Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan should be in place so that, in the event of a collections emergency, staff and outside responders will know the best way to mitigate the effects of the disaster. This should involve regular inspection of the internal and external security systems and fire detection and suppression systems as well as written response and recovery plans and evacuation routes. Emergency supplies should be kept on-site. Staff training in disaster response is an important part of emergency preparedness: This includes training on evacuation procedures, personal safety, and collection salvage procedures.