

Environmental Guidelines Taskforce report: An interim position - April 2014

The AICCM Council established an Environmental Guidelines Taskforce in 2009 to provide conservators and the wider Australian museum community with an AICCM position on how to respond to the global debate on safe environmental parameters for the display and storage of objects and collections.

Four years on we have finally reached an interim position. What is that interim position, and why has it taken so long?

Firstly the position, which is as follows: AICCM Interim Temperature and Relative Humidity Guidelines for Acceptable Storage and Display Conditions

The AICCM has developed interim temperature and relative humidity guidelines for acceptable storage and display conditions of general collection material based on those developed by professional conservation groups internationally, most notably by the American Institute for Conservation (AIC).

It should be noted that specific temperature and relative humidity requirements for sensitive or fragile collections and for collections on loan should be determined in consultation with a professional conservator.

Some material will require different or tighter conditions which may be managed through, for example, the use of micro-climates. Additional specific environmental requirements, such as light levels, air-flow, and other conditions, should be determined based upon professional conservation advice.

The AICCM recommended Interim Temperature and Relative Humidity Guidelines for acceptable storage and display conditions of general collection material are:

- **Temperature – between 15–25°C with allowable fluctuations of +/-4°C per 24 hr.**
- **Relative Humidity – between 45-55% with an allowable fluctuation of +/- 5% per 24 hr.**

Where storage and display environments experience seasonal drift, RH change to be managed gradually across a wider range limited to 40% – 60%.

Temperature and Relative Humidity parameters for preservation of cultural materials will differ according to their material, construction and condition, but stable conditions maintained within the parameters above are generally acceptable for most objects.

Secondly, why has it taken so long?

Relaxed environmental parameters for museums have been on the table for consideration by the conservation community for at least the last five years, promoted by building managers and directors alike.

Sir Nicholas Serota, director of Tate had joined a pivotal public dialogue hosted by the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) at the National Gallery, London in September 2008, stating that the issue of achievable and appropriate environmental levels had to be addressed, positing the concept that visitors to the

Tate may have to wear overcoats in winter due to the collections being exhibited at lower temperatures.

At the same time the Bizot Group, also known as the International Group of Organizers of Large Scale Exhibitions, had drawn up draft guiding principles covering the broad area of reducing carbon footprints, the relevant environmental guidelines principle reading as follows:

“Environmental standards should become more intelligent and better tailored to clearly identified needs. Blanket conditions should no longer apply. Instead conditions should be determined by the requirements of the individual objects or groups of objects and the climate of the part of the world where the museums is located.”

Two and a half years ago it looked as though international agreement on relaxation of environmental conditions in museums and galleries to reduce energy consumption, whilst not compromising the preservation of collections, was close.

The AICCM Taskforce produced a draft document, which then went on to win the 2011 Museums Australia Overall Winner Museums and Galleries National Awards.

However, this has proved a little embarrassing, as shortly thereafter it became clear that the international conservation community was divided on this issue, and the document never saw the light of day.

The Taskforce, whilst potentially able to provide parameters for Australia's permanent collections, was unable to do so for any collection space where international loans were likely to be housed, if the collecting institution wanted to continue to borrow artworks and objects from overseas.

Since then the debate internationally has become somewhat polarised between conservators who are not prepared to relax standards, particularly in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and those that are, and between art conservators and museum conservators.

At one end are organisations such as Munich's Doerner Institute which in 2013 stated:

“a stable room climate with tight ranges for relative humidity and temperature has been largely responsible in the past for the excellent condition of sensitive art objects, including paintings of all types, in our collections. To depart from these values, would increase the risk for our collections and do little to help the environment.

Moreover, the relaxed Bizot 'Interim Guidelines' increase the risk for all lenders and will raise insurance premiums, perhaps very significantly. The institute is convinced that the goals of a “green museum” and “sustainability” can be achieved by means other than by abandoning globally accepted museum standards that are also applied generally to art in transit around the world.”

At the other end of the debate, the proponents of a more liberal approach include Jim Reilly of the Image Permanence Institute in the US who recently stated:

"it's time to put a stake in the heart of the zombie of 20/50 for all collections, all the time. The standard is not ideal for all circumstances, doesn't meet the needs of many collection types, and is difficult and costly to maintain mechanically."

Jonathan Ashley-Smith, former Head of Conservation at the V&A in London, as long ago as 1994 stated:

"as far as environmental damage is concerned my thesis is that if you move a sound object from an environment somewhere in that middle range of 50rh plus or minus 15 to another environment that is also in that mid range, the risk of detectable additional deterioration is small."

In between the two extremes lies a variety of positions. The AIC issued guidelines in 2010 that were endorsed by the American Association of Museums Directors in May 2013 as follows:

"For the majority of cultural materials, a set point in the range of 45-55% relative humidity with an allowable drift of +/-5% yielding a total annual range of 40% minimum to 60% maximum and a temperature range of 15-25C is acceptable. Fluctuations must be minimised"

Meanwhile the new UK standard PAS 198 'Specifications for Managing Environmental Conditions for Cultural Collections' is not as prescriptive allowing 35-65% RH and 5-30C temperature as determined by a process best described as a risk-managed, holistic approach to environmental management.

No "ideal" standard is presented—the goal is to help users make their own judgments based on local climates, an understanding of collection material vulnerabilities to agents of deterioration, the capabilities of the mechanical system and the building envelope, and the move toward energy reduction.

Finally there are also the non conservators weighing into the debate, such as Maxwell Anderson, currently Director of the Dallas Museum of Art:

"Throughout their history, art museums have spawned and fostered a subculture indifferent to developments in the world at large. Our ocean liner-like art galleries are slow to change course even in the face of evidence demanding it. A critical illustration of this habit is the rigid formula arrived at long ago that prescribes the set points of relative humidity and temperature in our museums."

"It remains an unshakable conviction for most conservators and administrators that unless a museum can guarantee lenders that its interior climate is 20 degrees celsius and 50 per cent relative humidity (with an allowance for minor fluctuations), it has no business asking for loans, and cannot be trusted with its own collection. That conviction informs many facets of a museum's operations beyond the cost, including how art is borrowed, lent, shipped, installed and stored."

Where the profession goes from here is under debate. Perhaps the most important initiative is that being undertaken by a joint IIC /ICOM-CC working group charged by both these leading professional groups in finding a path forward.

The working group will be providing an interim report on the issue at both the ICOM-CC Melbourne Conference and the IIC Hong Kong Congress, both in September 2014.

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In reaching the AICCM Taskforce's Interim position, Julian would particularly like to thank the contribution of Taskforce members Catherine Earley, Trish Stokes, Jonathan London, Sarah Slade and Barbara Reeve.