



Contexts for Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Peak Conservation: Is there an inevitable end of the institutional conservation department?

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For many years the media has spoken of peak oil, the point at which there are diminishing returns for effort in managing a resource, and a point where it is recognized that the end of an industry is on the horizon. Some industries handle this well, others like Kodak, disappear from relevance as they fail to adapt. Have conventional models of institutional conservation departments peaked, and how is our profession responding to changed expectations about what we should be delivering? It is an uncomfortable truth that many organizations see their conservation departments as something they are obliged to have rather than as part of the front line business of providing access to collections. A stand-off has developed where the “idea” of conservation can’t be dismissed, but the commitment to high quality outcomes is not strong. Flagship projects disguise systemic underfunding, absence of career opportunities, facilities operating on 20+ year old infrastructure, and increasing open hostility to conservators as an obstacle, rather than as facilitators. Funding for care of many of our greatest national treasures is almost entirely absent beyond the salary of the individual conservator. Deterioration of premier collection items is being observed, preservation pathways developed, and actions not implemented. Instead of bringing their considerable experience to bear on solving conservation problems, senior conservators are locked in trivial battles over funding, often for sums of money with four or less digits. Conservation management structures have been declining in relevance as departmental staff debate one another rather than harness their creative energy into developing a perspective that convinces our Directors and politicians that our work is more than a back of house wage burden. If conservation of collections held on behalf of the public is actually something that matters, then how and why has our profession reached its current impasse?

This presentation will make a number of observations about how institutional conservation departments struggle to come to terms with changing expectations and new institutional models. It will propose that we have reached a fork in the road. One path leads to a prolonged slow decline as a living museum of conservation, and the other, and more difficult path, is around re-inventing relevance. I will discuss the need to engage with emerging and digital technologies, research and professional development; evidence based methodologies, and fixed ethical standpoints and their role in inhibiting change and collection care outcomes.

