AICCM | Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

Collection Care First Aid

You notice a crack, stain, patch of mould, insect damage, a loose binding, a textile under strain or an unexpected change in the collection environment. What should you do first?

Good collection care starts before treatment. This guide helps you make safer first decisions: describe what you can see, understand the immediate risk, take low-risk preventive action and recognise when professional conservation advice is needed.



If there is an active emergency

People and site safety come first. Follow your organisation's emergency procedures and do not enter an unsafe area to rescue collections. Use AICCM's Disaster Response resources for floods, fire, mould and other collection emergencies.

1. Start with four questions

- **What do I see?** Use neutral condition language.
- **What is the risk?** What could worsen if nothing changes?
- **What is the safest first step?** Reduce risk without treating the object.
- **When should I call a conservator?** Escalate when consequence or uncertainty is high.

2. Use a decision model

Safe preventive action	You understand the risk and can reduce it without treating the object. Examples include reducing unnecessary handling, improving support, documenting condition, removing an obvious external hazard where safe, reducing avoidable light and improving housekeeping around the collection.
Pause, document and seek advice	The cause is uncertain, deterioration may be active, the material is sensitive or the next action could be difficult to reverse. Make the situation safer, record what you see and seek conservation advice before intervening.
Stop and escalate	The situation is hazardous, contaminated, unstable, culturally sensitive, actively deteriorating, wet or mould-affected at scale, or requires treatment. Protect people and the collection; do not clean, repair, dismantle or apply materials without appropriate professional input.

3. Spot the problem

Use the AICCM **Visual Glossary** to compare visible signs of deterioration with photographs and plain-language descriptions. It is designed to help you identify and describe condition so you can communicate more clearly with a conservator.

Open the Visual Glossary

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4. Prepare, prevent and keep learning

- **Collection Care:** Australian gateway to reCollections and collection care guidance.
  Open
- **Disaster hub:** Disaster planning, response, fire, flood and mould.
  Open
- **Disaster Preparedness Calendar:** Recurring actions to reduce disaster risk.
  Open
- **Environmental Guidelines:** Australian, climate-responsive guidance for managing collection environments.
  Open
- **Preventive Conservation wiki:** Risk management, pests, environment and agents of deterioration.
  Open
- **Special Interest Groups:** Connect with Book and Paper, Objects, Textiles, Preventive Conservation and other professional networks.
  Open

5. When to contact a conservator

- Active or accelerating deterioration.
- Flaking, friable, powdering or structurally unstable material.
- Water, active mould, pests, soot, contamination or hazardous material.
- A significant, culturally sensitive or restricted item where authority and handling requirements matter.
- Any proposed cleaning, repair, adhesive removal, reshaping, treatment or complex mounting.
- Preparation for transport or display where the object is vulnerable.
- A problem larger than your people, time, equipment or environmental capacity.
- Any situation where you are uncertain and the action would be difficult to reverse.

Find a Conservator

Search AICCM Professional Members by state and specialisation.

Search the directory

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