Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

AICCM COLLECTION CARE FIRST AID WORKSHEET

Environment, pests, risk and disasters

Four Questions to Ask

- What do you see?
- What is the risk?
- What is the safest first step?
- When would you call a conservator?

Safe First Steps

- People first: enter only when the site / area is safe.
- If safe, stop or contain the source and protect unaffected collection material to buy time for help to arrive.
- Document damage, then triage affected from unaffected material if you have adequate space.

Common Mistakes

- Prioritising objects over personal or public safety.
- Going in without a plan or team approach.
- Interventive actions that are inappropriate: too late, too aggressive, too risky without guidance from a professional.

Escalation Triggers

- Health and safety concerns: contaminated floodwater, active mould, fire / soot, unstable building or hazardous materials.
- Large volume of wet collections, sensitive photographic / audiovisual material or no safe drying capacity.
- Need for freezing, specialist salvage, environmental diagnosis or an organisation-wide response.

Resources

AICCM Disaster hub - Australian disaster planning, response, flood, fire and mould resource. Open

AICCM Disaster Planning - Be Prepared - Designed particularly for museums with few trained or paid staff and no conservator. Open

AICCM Disaster Preparedness Calendar - Seasonal, practical risk-reduction prompts. Open

AICCM Environmental Guidelines - Risk-based, climate-responsive collection environment guidance; below 70 per cent relative humidity helps reduce mould risk. Open

Canadian Conservation Institute – Water - Framework for preventing secondary damage and planning water recovery. Open

American Institute for Conservation – Resources for Collection Care - Gateway to emergency preparedness and the AIC Wiki. Open

International Conservation Services – Tips & Tricks: Conservators share their know-how in collections care, preservation, and disaster recovery. Open

CCAHA Preservation Glossary Open

Visible sign / scenario	Ask	Safe first move	Tempting mistake	Escalate when...
Water leak - small local area	• Is the space safe? • Can the source of the leak be identified and stopped without further risk?	• Close off the area to staff/visitors • Implement incident command/phone tree • Contact and consult emergency services • Gather PPE • Document damage • Contain source of water and protect unaffected items is safe	• Don't rush in and move wet / unstable objects without a plan. • Don't wait too long, allowing mould to germinate.	• Determine if space is safe to enter • There are health and safety hazards present (contaminated water, electrical or structural risks, mould) • Scale of damage is beyond your staffing capacity and material knowledge • Items are highly damaged and high value.
Water event - large scale flood	• Is the space safe? • How much is wet, how wet, and how fast can we stabilise it?	• Follow emergency service guidance before reentering the space • Establish triage, identify priorities • Create air movement / drying capacity only where safe (dehumidifiers, fans, drying racks) • Call conservation / disaster support early for specialist advice	• Don't stack wet books • Don't seal wet collections in ordinary plastic bags/tubs without next step • Don't attempt to dry items with heat	• High mould health risk • Coated papers / photographs • Where there is high volume and no drying capacity, freezing may be required.
Mould outbreak	• What is the cause of the high humidity? • Is the mould growth active / widespread?	• Restrict access and isolate area • Use appropriate PPE • Address moisture issues	• Don't attempt to remove mould in unventilated space with brush, vacuum or spray • Don't move affected items, spreading contamination to unaffected areas. • Don't attempt to remove mould while active	• Widespread outbreak (over 30% of a room or collection) • Underlying issues of recurrent damp • Contaminated heating / ventilation • Vulnerable collections.
High relative humidity / condensation	• Is this a transient reading or a sustained humidity issue? • Are the conditions a high enough risk for damage?	• Check instrument and sensor location • inspect items and spaces for damp / mould or metal corrosion • improve air circulation / building issue; • assess risk using AICCM environmental guidelines. • Protect sensitive items with microclimate storage (enclosed box or container) • Add dehumidifiers and fans to the space	• Don't chase a single set point or expect very strict environmental conditions be met • Don't run air conditioners to mitigate (this can actually increase relative humidity!)	• Persistent relative humidity at or above 70% • Repeated condensation and mould • Highly sensitive collections affected

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Pest evidence	• Is it live activity, old damage or an isolated incoming item?	• Document evidence. • Isolate suspect incoming material as appropriate and monitor over several weeks/months. • Inspect nearby objects, especially organic materials. • Use monitoring traps.	• Don't spray pesticides on collections • Don't discard evidence before pest identification.	• Live infestation. • Multiple areas or widespread infestation. • High-risk collection.
Light exposure	• Is sunlight or unnecessary light reaching sensitive materials?	• Eliminate UV through films, filters, and glazing. • Reduce avoidable exposure by reducing exposure levels and time. • Use blinds and lighting scheduling. • Document display conditions and prioritise solutions for most sensitive items.	• Don't assume ultraviolet alone is the issue. • Don't leave sensitive material on permanent display.	• Highly light-sensitive items • Loan / exhibition parameters require specialist advice.
Soot / fire residue	• Is the space safe? • Once the site is cleared are there hazardous residues? •	• Follow emergency service guidance before reentering the space. • Document damage. • Use safety controls and PPE. • Triage collections, separating most from least affected. • Minimise handling; call conservation / disaster support early for specialist advice.	• Don't attempt to wipe or vacuum soot before assessment. • Don't use water to remove soot or ash.	• Hazardous residues. • Lacking capacity or space for a large incident. • Wet fire-suppression causing secondary damage, typically mould growth. • Especially fragile surfaces.
Dust / poor housekeeping	• What is generating dust? • How sensitive are the surfaces that are soiled?	• Improve housekeeping with regularly scheduled cleaning of collection spaces. • Control or remove sources of dust (eg. carpeting) • Clean collection only with approved methods and collections specialist guidance.	• Don't over-clean objects with household products. • Don't polish silver too aggressively or too frequently. • Don't assume dust isn't damaging (it is!).	• Friable / sensitive surfaces. • Hazardous dust or particulate. • Pervasive building or external source. • Mould and pests attracted to dust accumulation.