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TIP SHEET

Risk Assessments for Collections

1. Introduction

This tip sheet looks at how to perform risk assessments for collections, including additional considerations for collections that are considered significant.

- It is important to have an accurate understanding of the threats of damage to your collections so that these can be managed, through mitigation processes, as much as possible.
- A risk that has been identified and assessed means any potential harm might be reduced.

2. Categories and Types of Risks

The first step in undertaking risk assessments is understanding the wide range of risks that can harm your objects, collections or the museum itself.

- There are broad categories of risks that have the potential to cause harm to your collections, or to your staff.
- These can be categorised as Direct and Indirect:

Direct – A direct risk is something that can be identified as likely causing direct harm to your collections. For example, allowing food to be consumed in areas where collections are stored or displayed introduces the direct risk of an insect infestation.

Indirect – An indirect risk is something that happens that can have a 'knock on' or secondary impact that may cause harm to your collections. For example, the covid 19 pandemic does not harm collections, but this is an 'indirect risk' because this event has meant that collections staff might be unable to monitor collections and the environment in storage and display areas because the museum cannot be accessed.

Within these categories, there are specific types of risks that have the potential to cause physical or intellectual harm to your collections:

Physical – Physical risks cause deterioration or damage to your collections. The Canadian Conservation Institute lists agents of deterioration¹ as:

- Physical forces (for example: a storage shelf collapsing, rough handling, visitor touching)
- Thieves and vandals
- Fire
- Water (for example: roof leaks, burst pipes, water from fire response, flooding)
- Pests
- Pollutants (for example: air borne particles, arsenic applied for past treatments)
- Light (ultraviolet / UV, infrared)
- Temperature / Relative Humidity (RH)
- Dissociation (for example: parts of an object becoming separated without documentation)

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/agents-deterioration.html>

Intellectual - Intellectual risks relate to associated knowledge or information about objects, collections or your museum itself.

- Information loss (for example: research or other known information about an object, collection or your institution – often called ‘institutional memory’ – is not recorded in a way that can be accessed in the future)
- Uninformed decisions (for example: acquisitions decisions not doing enough due diligence in research about a potential acquisition or de-accessions being made for reasons that are not based on best practice)
- Loss of benevolent status (for example: public perception of the museum declines because of scandals related to poor management or harassment allegations)

3. How to Identify and Evaluate Risks

The second step in assessing overall risks at your museum is identifying the widest possible range of risks that could occur.

- Museums tend to have similar overall risks but it is important to identify the main risks that are unique to your institution.
 - Fire is usually the biggest risk for all museums
 - Be sure to canvas opinion of a many people (staff, other local museums) to get a broad range of perspectives on all possible risks, and risks that may be unique to your location that need additional consideration.

3.1 How to identify risks:

- Get information from within your own institution:
 - Canvas the opinion of other staff at your museum.

- Do an informal collection survey to understand the general condition of the collection, to assess important information like material type, the most significant collections, and the most (monetarily) valuable pieces
 - For an example of a collections survey, please see: <https://www.amnh.org/research/natural-science-collections-conservation/general-conservation/documentation/collection-surveys>
- Collect internal documents such as floor plans (that include security features, emergency exits and fire suppression information), policies and procedures related to risks and emergencies
- With help from the Facilities Manager, complete or update your facilities report
 - The Facilities Report will enable you to identify risks and mitigation methods that may be ‘built in’ to your building.
 - For example, if your museum is made from combustible materials (=risk); the fire suppression system type (=mitigation method); condition of building envelope (=possible risk)
 - For an example of a Facilities Report, please see: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/facility-report.pdf>
- Get information from outside your institution:
 - Research local meteorological, seismic and other local sources to see if there are natural disasters that affect your area including hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and wild fires
 - Inquire with local emergency services to see what community wide disasters they have prepared for as these will most likely be a major risk to your institution too.

3.2 Classifying Risks

You can classify each individual risk according to **frequency** and **severity**³.

- For each potential risk in your institution, classify as Type 1, 2 or 3:
 - Frequency: Type 1: Rare and catastrophic.
 - Severity: Physical forces 1: Earthquake that destroys the entire building
 - Frequency: Type 2: Severe but sporadic.
 - Severity: Physical force 2: Dropping or breaking objects due to poor handling
 - Frequency: Type 3: Gradual and constant.
 - Severity: Physical force 3: Shelf bends due to gravity and lack of extra support

*Note: if you have issues that are severe [Physical force 2] but constant [Frequency Type 3] such as daily breaking of objects, immediate action is required.

If you have issues that are catastrophic [Physical force 1] and constant [Frequency Type 3], you need to move your museum to another location.

See Template below – **Risk; Type of Risk; Notes** apply to this section

3.3 How to Assess Risks

The third step is to look at the list of risks and determine *how likely* it is that each risk could happen at your museum, and the impact of the occurrence on your collections and your building. Be sure to review the 'likelihood' rating on an annual basis, as part of your Emergency Planning³.

There are three key aspects of a risk:

- Likelihood of the risk occurring
- Amount of the collection affected by a risk
- Loss of monetary value of the objects affected

Add the 3 numbers together so that you have a number between 3 and 15, which allows you to quantify your risks and prioritize your mitigation actions. Please refer to the Risk Template for more details.

Tip: Some risks may be more likely in different seasons – be sure to think of a typical year and indicate any months or seasons that might present higher risks.

See Template below – **Likelihood of Occurring; Percentage of Collection / Building Impacted; Seasonal Considerations; Notes** apply to this section.

4. Risk Mitigation, Management Tools and Techniques

After you have identified and ranked the potential risks present at your museum you are able to reduce the impact the risks could have if they occur, by putting preventive measures in place that can either remove the risk or reduce the harm that caused if the risk occurs.

- Each mitigation technique relates to the specific identified risk.
- Prioritise the risks that have been identified as the 'most likely' to impact your collections.
- Share the highest risks with management so that mitigation measures are prioritised in strategic planning.
 - For example: If a curator has many years of collections and institutional knowledge that is not documented anywhere, this is a high risk of intellectual loss. The curator should allocate adequate time to record this knowledge either orally, or in shared documents, on a regular basis. This should not be left to 'pre-retirement' succession planning.

² Please see Robert Waller, *Conservation Risk Assessment: A Strategy for managing resources for preventative conservation* for more details - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237454788_Conservation_risk_assessment_A_strategy_for_managing_resources_for_preventive_conservation.

³ Please see MAS' Standards for Museums 2016: G. Risk Management – Emergency Preparedness

- If the cost of a fire suppression system seems like a huge expense to your senior managers, let them know the estimated monetary value of collections that would be lost if there was a fire.
- Determine which risks need to have insurance coverage and be sure your policy has adequate coverage. Having a monetary value assigned to your significant objects and collections means you can tailor your policy coverage to your collection with more precision – inadequate coverage is not acceptable, over-coverage is a waste of your annual budget.
- If an activity is causing an unacceptable level of risk it may be necessary to stop or revise this to lower risk levels.

Tip: All programs and events should have an event-specific risk assessment⁴ undertaken to evaluate levels of risk to participants and collections.

See Template below – **Mitigation Measures; Notes** apply to this section

5. Emergency Planning

Emergencies will still happen even with the most thorough risk assessments: the important thing is to be prepared.

- Consider using DPlan, the free online template for creating a custom Disaster Plan for your museum created by the North East Document Conservation Centre⁵.
- If your museum does not have an Emergency Preparedness Working Group, create one. Be sure to include a senior manager, and key staff with functions related to your building, security, collections care and access.
- Reach out to other local institutions (museums, libraries, archives) to build reciprocal response networks and resources. For example, their staff could be called upon to help with salvage recovery in the event of a site specific emergency at your museum, and other institutions may have space you could use on a temporary basis for

collections recovery in an emergency situation.

- Meet local emergency planning coordinators from your municipal / territorial area, fire and police responders to gather advice, ensure support is in place, and to learn any additional requirements from their perspectives should be considered in your emergency planning.
- Be sure your Emergency Plan is accessible only to the members of the team who lead response activities – the Plan will have information like floor plans, security details and collection values that are confidential.

6. Further Resources for Assessing Risk

- <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/risk-management-heritage-collections.html>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237454788_Conservation_risk_assessment_A_strategy_for_managing_resources_for_preventive_conservation
- https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/cci-icc/documents/services/risk-management-heritage-collections/risk_Manual-2016-eng.pdf
- https://www.iccrom.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-Risk-Management_English.pdf
- <http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/How-to-Guides-Assess-and-Manage-Risk-in-Collections-Care.pdf>
- <http://museumsassn.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/BP-7-Risk-Management.pdf>
- <https://www.amnh.org/research/natural-science-collections-conservation/general-conservation/documentation/risk-assessment>
- <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation>
- <http://protectheritage.com/blog/>
- <https://museum-sos.org/htm/index.html>

⁴ <https://safetyculture.com/checklists/event-risk-assessment/>

⁵ <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/dplan-the-online-disaster-planning-tool>

- <https://nonprofitrisk.org/resource-library/>
- Irene Karsten, "Risk Management Sample Report", Canadian Conservation Institute June 2011.

7. Template for Assessing Risk

This template provides a matrix for assessing risk, listing some of the most common risks for objects, collections and your museum.

- Be sure to consider additional risks that may be unique to your museum.
- For the most accurate assessment, ask a number of staff and volunteers to complete this template.
- Using excel for your assessment means you can filter and sort the results.
- You can use this template for collections and for your facility. Your Facility Manager will likely be the best resource for information relating to your building.
 - This Risk Template does NOT include evaluating risks to people. This should be done by your Facility Manager.
- Consider risks to your collections as a whole, as well as by location, and for individual objects. For example, collections in storage have different risks to collections that are on display.
- Objects that cannot be easily moved should have these requirements listed as part of your Emergency Preparedness Plan (Object number & requirement – for example, 2 people required, pallet & pallet jack required).
- Because locations can change, it is better to regularly print a copy of your Inventory (or save a digital copy that can be accessed / printed as required by key personnel) as part of your Emergency Planning procedures.
- Mitigation costs may be prohibitive. Be sure senior managers are part of the mitigation and response discussions so they can prioritise budgets accordingly. It may be possible to include mitigation costs in grant applications as part of larger projects.
- Mitigation Measures are suggested, but these may not be applicable to your site. Be sure to refine them as necessary so they are customised to your museum.

CONTACT US!

Phone:

(306) 780-9279 Toll-Free in SK 1-866-568-7386

Email: mas@saskmuseums.org

424 McDonald Street
Regina, SK S4N 6E1

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