

Alliances for Response = Effective Emergency Response
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I am here today to talk about emergencies of all kinds that endanger the survival of our scientific, historic, and artistic heritage and how we can all work to mitigate damage and destruction of these collections, if not completely eliminate the possibility.

However, I would first like to tell you why this topic is so important to Heritage Preservation and me personally. And for that I would like to refer to some remarks Edgar Preston Richardson made on the occasion of his receiving the Distinguished Service to Museums award from AAM in 1981 for more than 35 years of service to the museum community.

Paraphrasing him, he said, “If I may speak of a great problem, unsolved 50 years ago and unsolved still in 1981, that is larger than any problem you are discussing in your meeting. Then and now, the educated adult minds of the United States—I emphasize adult—remain unaware of the importance of what is in the collection of the museums of the United States and Canada.” He noted that he was not speaking of large museums in major metropolitan areas but of museums in other parts of our country. Citing some specific examples, he said Americans do not feel a necessity to study the glass collection in Toledo, Ohio, after they have been to Murano, Italy. Nor do the archeology buffs visit the antiquities of North America, such as the Tertiary and Quaternary fossils in Lincoln, Nebraska, or the Mound Builder collections in Columbus, Ohio. He also singled out small museums such as the Museum of the Fur Trade in Chadron, Nebraska.

The fact that I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska may be the reason his remarks so attracted me; I hope not. He was sounding a clarion call that to this day I do not believe has been taken up by the museum community in any meaningful way.

I would not be as harsh in my characterization of what has been done in the last 25 or so years to protect collections from disasters. In fact, I think that as institutional collections care policies have evolved and as local, state, regional, and national organizations, such as SPNHC and Heritage Preservation, have worked to promote improved collections care it was logical to first put the emphasis on the slow but relentless conditions that threaten collections, which include among other things inherent vice in materials and improper storage and climate control.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the very real threats that natural history collections are facing from being orphaned to major reductions in financial commitments, such as at my undergraduate alma mater, the University of Nebraska.

Even as challenging as these issues are, we would be negligent if we did not make it a priority to address the swift and catastrophic, everything from water pipes breaking and thefts to natural disasters and—something we have seldom experienced until recently—terrorist attacks.

I was interested to reread our report “Preserving Natural Science Collections: Chronicle of Our Environmental Heritage,” which was published in 1993. There is only a brief mention of the importance of museums having an emergency plan concerned with the protection of collections, and there is no specific mention of emergency preparedness in the recommendations.

While it is always helpful to work together cooperatively, alliances are especially important in effectively dealing with most, if not all, emergencies. I am speaking of alliances with other museums as well as first responders—e.g., firefighters, police, and emergency management agencies.

The goal of the Heritage Emergency National Task Force is to have a network in place similar to what exists for emergencies generally. While there are excellent examples of local, state and regional consortiums, we are a long way from achieving a nationwide network.

The Task Force has made considerable progress in developing a cooperative nationwide heritage emergency strategy to assist museums, libraries, archives, and research collections to:

- take steps to prevent or mitigate damage from a potential disaster,
- prepare to respond to an emergency of whatever magnitude and, of course,
- provide assistance when a disaster does occur.

It is important to understand where the responsibilities lie for addressing emergencies. The primary responsibility lies with local governments. We look to them first to provide emergency medical, police, and fire personnel.

Because some emergencies affect more than just one community or are of great magnitude, emergency management agencies have been formed by each state and the federal government. As you probably know, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the designated agency for the federal government. If the emergency is widespread or severe enough, FEMA provides both personnel and financial assistance to help citizens and institutions recover from a disaster, as well as:

- offering and sometimes requiring efforts to eliminate conditions that are likely to lead to a disaster—for example, moving an entire community to above a flood plain zone—and
- providing information, training, and financial assistance to help communities be prepared for an emergency. An example is teaching the proper way to board up building openings before a hurricane strikes.

Both are seen as an investment that in the long run will save lives and reduce the cost of repairs, reconstruction, and, in the case of museums, salvaging collections.

Like many other organizations, Heritage Preservation first addressed the issue of emergencies on its own. Our annual meeting in 1991 was a seminar, which resulted in a publication.

It was not until 1994 that we realized how important it was to work cooperatively with others. It took an earthquake in California and major flooding in several Midwest states to prompt us to act.

Also, there was a more pragmatic issue that presented itself as a result of these two disasters: did collections qualify for federal assistance to salvage and conserve them? There was no question that hospitals and schools, even businesses and families qualified. However, whether the collections of museums, libraries, archives, and similar institutions qualified was unclear.

How did we begin? Of course, being good bureaucrats, with a meeting! First, we worked with FEMA to develop a policy that made it clear that collections qualified for support. Then we planned the meeting where the Director of FEMA could announce that its regulations had been clarified. Most of the current members of the Heritage Emergency National Task Force were present at the initial meeting, or summit as we called it. Of course, the FEMA announcement put everyone in a positive frame of mind, and all agreed that it was important to form an interdisciplinary effort to enhance and complement the work each organization was doing to address the needs of its constituents regarding emergencies.

The result was that the Heritage Emergency National Task Force was established and general agreement was reached on three points:

- All our organizations needed to better plan to help our constituents respond to an emergency and assist them to be prepared for one.
- Since disasters often cover a large geographical area and impact more than one kind of collecting institution, a joint effort made practical sense.
- Most importantly, by working together we could accomplish things our organizations could not do individually.

The two co-sponsors of the Task Force are Heritage Preservation and FEMA. There are 32 other members of the Task Force, consisting of:

- national service organizations/associations, including the American Association of Museums and American Library Association;
- national and regional conservation groups, such as SPNHC, AIC, and the Association of Regional Conservation Centers; and
- federal government agencies that either provide financial support through grants to cultural heritage organizations or have their own collections. Examples include the Small Business Administration, National Science Foundation, Smithsonian Institution, and National Park Service.

Heritage Preservation is the only organization in our country whose mission encompasses all these kinds of collecting institutions. This is why we are one of the Task Force's co-sponsors.

The Task Force agreed on five general areas that needed to be addressed:

- informing collecting institutions
- training conservation and preservation professionals
- assisting onsite
- promoting local and statewide emergency task forces
- informing the public.

First, information for collecting institutions is where we have put most of our efforts to date. Some of you may be familiar with the *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel*, which we have produced in

both English and Spanish. It provides information for staff about what to do during the first 48 hours after an emergency. This is information that any staff member can use, not just conservators and preservation professionals.

More than 100,000 of these Wheels have been sold or distributed free, and we know that Wheels are in use in more than 40 countries. The Wheel has been translated and produced in Chinese, Dutch, and French, and there will soon be a Japanese version.

Additional information resources include “flood packets” that are mailed to collecting institutions after a nationally declared disaster. The packets contain detailed information about salvaging damaged collections and stabilizing buildings. Another is “Resources for Recovery,” a guide to federal emergency assistance that is available to collecting institutions. This publication will soon be revised to not only update it but to include a new section about where support for mitigation efforts can be obtained.

In the area of training: Working with the Task Force, members of the American Institute for Conservation developed, tested, and refined a disaster response curriculum, which was used in a series of six regional training workshops. There were 85 individuals trained, and a number of them continue to provide training to others. This has increased our capability to provide onsite assistance.

FEMA and Heritage Preservation have established the Heritage Emergency Roster, which has over 200 preservation professionals available for onsite disaster assistance. Task Force members helped to enlist qualified professionals whom FEMA can call upon quickly to go onsite in a major national disaster.

September 11, 2001, changed our country in profound ways, changes that are still evolving. For the Task Force it has had the greatest impact on our goals concerning onsite assistance and promoting local and state cooperative efforts.

Our first response was to produce a report, “Cataclysm and Challenge,” about the impact on cultural heritage of the terrorist attacks. It assessed the preparedness of collecting institutions in the area around the World Trade Center and provided recommendations for what steps should be taken to prepare for this or any other kind of disaster. I don’t think you will be surprised by the recommendations, but given that they come from those who experienced this terrible event firsthand, they have prompted many institutions to take steps to implement them.

Also, the report received a significant amount of general media attention throughout our country, especially on the anniversary of September 11th last year. It was featured in many newspapers and on national radio and television networks.

Because of the nature of the September 11th attacks, in most cases little could be done to avert the loss of cultural heritage. One example of prompt action was the Jewish Museum, which is near the epicenter of the attacks. The staff turned on the electric switch to close the ventilators. When the electricity failed, staff went to the roof to hand crank them closed.

The recommendations of the report emphasize that:

- Emergency planning must be a priority—both preparing a plan initially and keeping it current.
- Staff should regularly practice implementing the plan and ensure there are emergency supplies onsite or close by.
- Plans should be made for various contingencies to prevent damage from likely kinds of emergencies.

Another lesson we learned was the importance of maintaining an up-to-date catalogue and storing a copy offsite. And, very importantly, collecting institutions need to get to know first responders—police, medical, and fire personnel—and emergency management agency staff so they will be knowledgeable about the institution’s mission, collections, and building. If first responders are familiar with cultural institutions in their community, they can often prevent destruction of cultural heritage. We call this “take a firefighter to lunch.”

The report also reinforced our determination to promote city and statewide emergency task forces with special emphasis on involving first responders through our Alliance for Response project.

We currently are working with four cities to develop model interdisciplinary local emergency task forces. The formation of alliances is underway in Boston, Cincinnati, and Dallas. A forum is being planned for this fall in New York City. We hope to be able to replicate these models throughout our country.

Some principles have emerged already. For example, the cooperation that we need is essential and is a two-way street:

- Preservation professionals have the salvage expertise but do not know emergency response protocols.
- First responders need to know about collections and historic buildings so they can be sensitive to preventing damage to them, if the emergency situation allows. It is essential we keep in mind that *human life is the most important priority in any emergency*.
- We need to learn the language of the first responders and emergency management agencies. In turn, they need to learn ours.
- It is essential that we take the initiative to be prepared before a disaster strikes.

All the forums share these goals:

- Information needs to be provided to collecting institutions on local disaster management issues.
- First responders need to be educated about why it is important to protect collections. They are unique and/or hold information that, if lost, will diminish the knowledge of our heritage.
- We need to redouble our efforts to gain a commitment at all levels of a collecting institution, especially among governing authorities and senior management, to disaster planning and periodic review and practice.
- We need to develop strong ongoing cooperative city, state, and/or regional networks or task forces.

While some professionals initially question the Task Force’s priority of providing information for the public, after hearing our rationale they almost always agree that it is important.

This is an instance where the cultural heritage community can provide a valuable service directly to those who experience an emergency. In turn our community will benefit by building public awareness about the importance of collecting institutions preserving the cultural heritage they hold for the future generations of their city, state, nation, and world, which in turn can lead to increased financial support.

Also, if we demonstrate that we are doing something to help our citizens, especially if it is part of an interdisciplinary effort, we have found that government agencies and private funders will respond with financial support.

After people have secured their safety, health, shelter, food, and clothing, what they are most concerned about is saving things they cherish.

We have developed information that any citizen can use to help salvage family heirlooms. This information is part of FEMA's website, and in a major disaster, FEMA publishes a newspaper for those in the disaster area that includes these recommendations.

We are currently working on a brochure that first responders can hand out as part of the information that is provided to those who have been in a disaster. We also hope to develop short videos that can be used by television stations.

Let me conclude with the obvious: If we are not prepared, our citizens and future generations will be the poorer for it. Emergency preparedness does not require significant personnel resources or money in most cases—mostly it requires perseverance and persistence.

Now is the time to act. SPNHC has been a vital partner in our Task Force. I hope that SPNHC and each of you will consider redoubling your commitment to this important cause.