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RISK ASSESSMENT AT LEICESTER

The Collection Risk Assessment Workshop held at the Museums Association Conference at Leicester University in September was run by The Canadian Museum of Nature and promoted by the Natural Sciences Section of UKIC. Facilitators for this two day workshop were Rob Waller, Sylvie Marcel and Jean-Marc Gagnon. The course was attended by 46 delegates, all museum professionals. Rob Waller's workshops have an enviable reputation and delegates attended with high expectations of this event. To the surprise of many, the approach was not the slick, high-powered, presentation that might have been expected. The sessions were conducted throughout in a relaxed and friendly manner whilst keeping up the momentum of the workshop so that all topics were fully covered.

From the outset it was emphasised that, in order to obtain funding for conservation works in museums, we must clearly define problems and solutions and communicate our needs to administrators who often are neither conservators, curators nor scientists. So often the approach is to bemoan lack of staff and funding to carry out essential conservation work and such a negative approach does not impress administrators and fund holders. The Canadian Museum of Nature's approach is more structured, forward-looking and positive and has already resulted in improved funding for conservation projects. The first stage of this structured approach was to look at the ten recognised agents of deterioration: physical forces, fire, water, criminals, pests, contaminants, light and radiation, incorrect temperature, incorrect relative humidity and custodial neglect. The last agent was the most contentious as it is currently interpreted as failure to document material, resulting in ultimate loss of data and specimens, even access to specimens. Delegates generally agreed that this is an important aspect but that it is not adequately described by the term curatorial neglect which has far wider implications. Using a simple matrix system, risks were assigned to one of three major categories ranging from constant and gradual to rare and catastrophic.

Parameters for estimating the magnitude of risks were then considered. Figures were assigned to parameters expressing potential extent of damage, loss in value and probability of loss. By multiplying these together an index representing the magnitude of risk can be calculated. Many delegates felt that assigning such figures, particularly when the parameters cannot be defined accurately and objectively, is an exercise of dubious value. For example the calculation of loss in value is very difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy, particularly since monetary value is rarely the prime consideration, with research and cultural values greatly exceeding market values in most cases. The facilitators agreed that precision is not possible but suggested that reasonable estimates are a possibility and that such figures are extremely useful for comparative purposes. The very exercise of evaluating risk magnitudes is valuable in helping curators to assess and reduce risks to their collections.

Having identified and evaluated risks on day one, the programme on day two moved to the management of risks, looking at methods for risk mitigation, levels for applying methods, mitigation strategies and their costs and benefits. Risk mitigation involved the identification of methods of control, ranging from eliminating the source of the risk (the preferred option) to acting on the agent of deterioration. Levels for applying methods were then discussed and categorised. These ranged from the location of a building to the establishment of safe procedures for handling collections. Mitigation strategies were then discussed, the objective being to encourage broad thinking and thorough analysis of the situation.

The evaluation of costs and benefits of risk mitigation strategies is an extremely important topic as these are criteria that will strongly influence senior management and funding bodies. When looking at costs, it is often useful to consider both a short-term, low cost solution and a long-term, high cost solution. All costs must be identified and evaluated as well as risks and collateral risks associated with both the implementation and maintenance of strategies. It should always be borne in mind that short-term solutions often result in higher long-term costs. When assessing benefits it is most important to consider

broad implications of actions and to look at aspects not included in the risk assessment procedure. Examples of benefits are improved efficiency of research and better staff morale.

As a grand finale to the workshop, delegates were given the opportunity to put their newly acquired skills to use by undertaking an exercise to determine mitigation strategies for a fictional scenario provided by the facilitators. Individual teams looked at different risk categories and presented their results to the group in a lively and good humoured discussion session.

After two days of presentations, exercises and brainstorming sessions, we left the

workshop with the feeling that time had been very well spent and that this had been an extremely worthwhile exercise. Congratulations to Rob and his team for communicating their enthusiasm for and commitment to a holistic approach to collections risk assessment. They have provided us with a methodology that can be applied to any collection in any museum and should enable us all to communicate the conservation needs of our collections in a thorough and convincing manner.

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