



Salvage Planning & Training in the Natural History Museum Galleries

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Risks to collections on display in the Natural History Museum Galleries

- Fire and smoke
- Water: environmental flooding or leaks from building defects
- Building collapse
- Accidental damage and vandalism
- Preventive conservation concerns e.g. Pest infestations and environmental control faults

Impacts of Collections Incidents on the Museum

- Health and Safety concerns for staff and visitors, hazards from damaged collections or buildings
- Reduction in opportunities for collections research and engagement
- Diversion of staff resource
- Financial and time costs incurred in repairing damage
- Reputational risk

Salvage in the Galleries

The Natural History Museum is home to over 80 million specimens. Only a fraction of these are on display at any time, however displays include some of the Museums most iconic specimens. Parts of the 19th century building in South Kensington are also of architectural and historical significance.

Although it is impossible to plan for every eventuality, it is useful to consider salvage of objects across a number of possible scenarios.

- Is it safer to remove objects or protect them in-situ?
- In which scenario are objects most at risk
- Storage of displaced objects
- Additional risks to objects outside of the Museum environment
- Documentation processes used to monitor condition, movement and treatment



Above: Important specimens or architectural features would require in-situ protection.



Above: Fire crews rescue objects during a training exercise at NHM Tring, Herts, 2023.

Selection of Salvage Priority Objects

- Which objects have the most potential for scientific research in line with the Museum's long term strategy and reflect the aims of the Museum
- Objects that are well documented and have a clear provenance
- Rarity of objects either within the Museums' collections or a national or global level
- Loan objects in line with responsibilities to lenders

Identification of priority objects is important for decision making but ensure a balance with the rate of deterioration of other objects.

In-situ Protection

This can be used for large or heavy objects to minimise risks from handling and transportation, changes to environmental conditions and the safety of staff.

Common materials and equipment used to protect collections from water damage in-situ include: Polythene sheeting, leak diverters, flood booms, absorbent materials, blocks to raise stand alone display cases out of standing water and lightweight surface protection boards.

In-situ fire protection is more complex. Traditional fire blankets have proven protective qualities but are heavy and bulky to store. The weight makes these undesirable for use with fragile objects and difficult to deploy.

A number of European institutions are working with textile technology companies to find alternative options. Use of new materials, some developed to control electric vehicle lithium battery fires could provide a lightweight, manoeuvrable solution. Further testing and research is necessary.

Removing Gallery Objects from the Scene of an Incident

If the removal of specimens is unavoidable, there are some points that must be considered:

- Safety is paramount and the scene must be confirmed safe prior to salvage operations
- Identify a suitable new location prior to moving and ensure a clear route
- Locate the correct tools/equipment to access, dismantle and transport specimens safely
- Contact colleagues who can offer further information or specialist knowledge
- Concentrate first on unaffected objects under threat
- Maintain effective communication with wider Museum team colleagues - Estate Management, Security, Visitor Experience teams, etc.



Above: NHM teams practice recovery of paper materials during a salvage training workshop.

Team Training and Collaborative Working

Effective training and collaboration improves emergency planning and response. Joint organisational training exercises are an opportunity to build working relationships within the Museum and with emergency service teams. Examining the process of incident response tests the Salvage Plan and helps to identify weaknesses in a controlled situation.

Plans evolve and regular reviews help to keep it relevant and focussed. Debrief and recording of lessons learned is an important part of the training process, highlighting any additional training needs and building on strengths. The Museum aims to run collaborative training exercises across all sites on a 3 to 5 year cycle.

Additional, regular training and information sessions include:

- Salvage awareness for staff - talks and salvage meetings
- Cross departmental incident debriefing
- Salvage Team workshops such as tabletop incident scenario training and object first aid
- Familiarisation with documentation such as the Salvage Plan, Recovery guidance documents, etc.



Above: Fire crews and Museum staff assemble for a salvage exercise at the NHM, London, 2019.

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