



The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials Inc.

www.aiccm.org.au

Salvaging keepsakes after a disaster

AICCM Information Leaflet

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A disaster such as a flood or fire often results in damage to personal effects. The information in this brochure is designed to assist people to protect, retrieve and preserve personal keepsakes damaged in a disaster. It aims to complement the wealth of disaster planning and risk management information available on the internet for communities and individuals.

Safety first

Personal and community safety is a priority at all times. Personal safety should always take precedent over the safety of possessions. Have an emergency plan for your home that includes emergency contact details, a designated meeting place and a list of emergency supplies.

Once personal and family safety strategies have been prepared, attention can be given to minimising the risk to personal effects from an incident or disaster.

Prevention, preparation, response and recovery

There are four stages to be considered when planning how to keep personal memorabilia and keepsakes safe before, during and after disasters.

1. Prevention
2. Preparation
3. Response
4. Recovery

Stages 1 & 2: PREVENTION and PREPARATION

These two stages can only be effective when they occur before a disaster actually occurs.

Identify important possessions

As a first step, identify the items in your home or care that are important/ irreplaceable. These items form the basis of your priority list. Such items may include personal identification and family records, such as passports, certificates, insurance details, property records, wills and other legal documents.

People who have experienced disaster first hand also regret not having salvaged at least some of their photographs. This is often because they have not been readily accessible for evacuation purposes, or have not been stored in a way to prevent damage.

A useful checklist of 'essential' and 'important but not essential' documents along with 'storage suggestions for safekeeping' has been included in the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) 'Personal Continuity Plan' at www.rmaa.com.au/docs/library/items/PersonalContinuityPlan.pdf

Suggested actions:

- Prepare an inventory of your precious and high priority items - those items you would single out for protection.
- Identify items you would take with you if you had to leave your property.
- Take photographs or have copies made of special or irreplaceable items, including photographs. Store the originals or copies off-site.
- Separate out your photographs and negatives and store the negatives and/or digital back-up files off-site.
- Prepare a list of what you have stored off-site and check on their condition regularly.
- Store a copy of your inventory and lists and any photographs in a safe location, preferably off-site
- Obtain up-to-date valuations of valuable items. Take photographs of these items and record their condition. Include this information in your priority lists.
- Review your insurance cover and discuss specifics of your cover with your insurance provider. In particular, check whether replacement the only option. If a family heirloom (e.g. a family bible) is damaged, is conservation and restoration work covered?

Identify potential threats

Identify any potential threats (fire, flood, leaks, landslides etc) and what items in your possession might be most at risk from such events. For example, though photographs are sensitive to water damage, metal items may not be so vulnerable.

There are three common examples of damage that can affect personal belongings, either in a localised incident or a larger scale disaster: physical breakages, water damage and fire damage. It's also important to note that items damaged by fire frequently exhibit water damage, due to efforts to contain the fire.

Suggested actions:

- Identify vulnerable items
- Store/package these items to protect from specific threats or have this specific packaging available in preparation for an event.

Mitigate the impact of potential threats

Implement measures to prevent damage from the threats you have identified, or measures to that will lessen their impact.

Suggested actions:

- Identify what you will take with you if you need to leave your property.
- Store these items in an accessible but secure location.
- Never store boxes of priority items (e.g. photo albums) on the floor – if there is water damage, they will be much more easily damaged.
- Have specific packaging available in preparation for an evacuation – for example, fragile items such as paintings will need to be well packed to prevent damage during transport.
- Have a supply of materials on hand to protect vulnerable items - for example, plastic sheeting to protect items from water leaks. Other useful materials are listed in Appendix I of *Be Prepared: Guidelines For Small Museums For Writing A Disaster Preparedness Plan* (see http://sector.amol.org.au/collections/conservation/be_prepared).

Stage 3: RESPONSE

The Response phase of your recovery plan is enacted when disaster strikes. A planned timely response to a disaster or an incident can ensure that damage to property and belongings is contained. In addition, it can enhance the likelihood of belongings being successfully restored during the subsequent Recovery phase.

Safety first

Safety is always a priority and everyone's responsibility.

Always wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including sturdy foot wear, disposable or heavy-duty work gloves and face masks. These will help to protect you from sharps, contaminated surfaces and particulates.

Don't re-enter a damaged building or area unless it is safe to do so. You may have to wait until the fire service or police have cleared you to enter the area.

If there is a source of water, turn it off or divert the flow and keep power off until the structure has been inspected and passed by an electrician.

Don't enter a room where the floor is covered in water if the electricity supply is still on. Also, don't use electrical appliances (e.g. fans) while standing on a wet surface.

Mould can grow quickly on damp or wet items. As mould spores are a health hazard, personal protective equipment (PPE) is essential – face masks, eye protection, gloves and clothes that can be washed in hot water or thrown away.

Buildings:

- Remove as much mud or other debris as possible.
- Remove as much water as possible by mopping and sponging.
- Wet insulation will need to be removed, as will floor coverings.
- Don't use a standard vacuum cleaner to extract water from wet carpets. Use only a purpose-designed “wet & dry” vacuum cleaner for mopping up water. You may be able to rent these from equipment suppliers.
- Use fans to circulate the air to promote evaporation. Open windows and doors to allow ventilation.
- Also remember to open cupboard doors and draws of furniture that has become wet.
- Remove or drill skirting boards to expose areas that may retain water or moisture.
- Remove carpeting and floor coverings if feasible.
- Notify your insurance agent as soon as possible.
- If practical, take photos of items in situ - these may be useful for insurance purposes.

Belongings and memorabilia

- If it is safe to do so, leave undamaged items in place and concentrate on retrieving damaged items.
- Remove fragile items from further risk, but try to handle as little as possible.
- Retain any items that are recognisable - it may be possible to restore them later.
- At this initial stage, avoid cleaning - just provide protection in boxes, trays or plastic bags.
- A handy rule to remember at this stage and until recovery of individual items can begin is: if it's dry, keep it dry; if it's damp, keep it damp; if it's wet, keep it wet.
- Remove any object that may lose colour and prevent it from further damaging other items.
- Remove rugs for drying and cleaning.
- Remove wet clothes for cleaning and drying.
- Hang leather goods to dry at room temperature.
- Lift curtains and drapes off wet carpet and loop through a coat hanger off the curtain rail.
- Put aluminium foil or glad wrap between furniture legs and wet carpet to prevent water being absorbed by the wood.
- Wipe wooden furniture dry with soft cloths.
- Move priority items – e.g. valuable paintings, art objects, books and wooden furniture - to a safe, dry place.

Stage 4: RECOVERY

Should you now seek to replace or conserve your possessions? After your site has been stabilised, you can turn your attention to the recovery of individual belongings.

Consider the relative importance of each affected item and the costs involved in either replacing them, or restoring them to as close to their original condition as possible.

It is important to note that you do have a say about recovery options for your belongings, especially for valuable, irreplaceable items.

If you do have valuable or other unique items that have been damaged, it is best to have them assessed and conserved by a specialist. This will need to be discussed with your insurance assessor and advice sought from a conservator as soon as possible.

If you require specialist advice from a conservator, contact your state museum, archive, library or gallery, or the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) Inc at www.aiccm.org.au for advice.

How damaged are your belongings?

Some items may be so damaged, sodden, burnt, charred, melted or distorted in a fire or flood that they may not be salvageable. However, it is often surprising what can be preserved. Retrieved items need to be handled carefully and boxed to protect them from further physical damage. Store them in a clean, dry area until they can be cleaned. Basic recovery steps include the following:

- Always wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) including gloves, a face mask and goggles. Remember mould is a respiratory hazard and fire residues can be toxic – protect yourself.
- Set aside a clean dry work area, with good ventilation to clean and dry items.
- Open windows, and use fans to create good air circulation. Note: fan-forced heaters are not recommended in tropical climates (e.g. Queensland) as raising the temperature tends to promote mould growth.
- Clean off loose soot, dust and ash with a vacuum cleaner. Don't use a duster or dust cloth as the grit can be quite rough and wiping or rubbing damaged items with a cloth will cause scratches.
- A vacuum with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter is best as the exhaust of a standard vacuum cleaner will expel the soot and any mould spores present back into your work area. "Micro" vacuum cleaner attachments used to clean computer keyboards are particularly useful for cleaning decorations and in cavities.
- It is best to avoid using a brush when cleaning soot off surfaces, as brushes can force soot particles further into the surface of an item. To clean items with a vacuum, set the vacuum and nozzle on low suction and place it near the surface of the item.
- If you are using a brush to help dislodge dirt and grit, use a soft-bristled brush and gently brush debris towards the vacuum nozzle. It is also good practice to cover the nozzle with cheesecloth or other soft fabric to prevent tearing or fragments being sucked into the vacuum.

- If you are cleaning mouldy items, dry them first and then the mould can be removed with a soft brush and vacuum. A brush used to clean mould items should be wrapped and then discarded afterwards so as not to spread the mould.
- Cleaning with a 'Smoke Sponge®' is sometimes necessary to remove greasy soot. Smoke sponges are made from vulcanised rubber and are very effective at removing soot, when dabbed against the scorched surface. These should be used in accordance with the supplied instructions and are available from suppliers of conservation materials. (See the Queensland State Archives' Suppliers list at www.archives.qld.gov.au/publications/PreservationServicesAdvices/psa_2.pdf).

Textiles	Textiles are best cleaned in two stages, with initial vacuuming to remove as much loose dirt and soot as possible. This is followed by gently dabbing a smoke sponge over the surface to remove more ingrained dirt. The textile can then be washed. More stubborn stains will probably require the services of a specialist dry cleaner or a conservator.
Metal objects	Metals can generally be cleaned with water and detergent. Rinsing with methylated spirits or acetone will speed up the drying process and minimise corrosion. If metals are left wet they can corrode quickly.
Wooden objects	Wooden items can be vacuumed using a soft brush attachment and followed with a smoke sponge if necessary. Varnished items can be cleaned using a clean, soft cloth, lightly dampened with white spirits but as some varnish is soluble in white spirits a small discrete area should be tested first.
Ceramics, glass	Ceramics and other decorative items can be gently washed and air dried. However, it is important to watch for loose or broken parts.
Photographs	Old black and white or colour photographs that are soiled, wet or stuck together can be immersed in water and gently agitated until they separate and the dirt is loosened. Air dry on blotter or paper towels, image side up. Modern digital prints are much more susceptible to water damage (many printing inks are water soluble) and need to be handled very carefully. It may be preferable to have copies of these images printed from the original digital file, rather than to salvage a damaged print.
Books	Gently press water out first, using towels. Then, if possible, air dry the book standing on one end, with the pages open. A fan set on low can assist drying. Take care not to direct a strong blast of air on to the book as this may damage the spine.

The tips provided in this brochure are fairly simple measures intended to provide a practical guide to salvaging your possessions. It isn't possible to include every type of material or every type of damage that may be encountered in a disaster situation. However, there are a number of useful resources available on the internet that can provide more specific guidance. (See "Further resources").

This information is intended as a general guide only. No liability or responsibility is accepted by the AICCM for treatments applied by an individual. More detailed advice is available from conservators at State and National museums, galleries, archives and libraries. Alternatively, contact the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) Inc at www.aiccm.org.au.

Further resources

- *Combatting Mould During the Wet Season* (Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory) – www.nt.gov.au/nreta/museums/objects/pdf/mouldbrochure.pdf
- *Dealing With Mouldy Objects* (The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne) – www.culturalconservation.unimelb.edu.au/ehs_manual/ehs22.html
- *Protect Your Precious Possessions* (The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne) – www.culturalconservation.unimelb.edu.au/publications/bushfire_protection.pdf
- *Be Prepared: Guidelines For Small Museums Writing A Disaster Preparedness Plan* – http://sector.amol.org.au/collections/conservation/be_prepared
- *On-line Disaster Planning and Response* (Queensland State Archives Preservation Services Advice PSA-6) - www.archives.qld.gov.au/publications/PreservationServicesAdvices/psa_6.pdf
- *Keeping Archives* – <https://www.archivists.org.au/records-salvage>
- *Mould Outbreak — An Immediate Response* (Canadian Conservation Institute) – www.cci-icc.gc.ca/headlines/mould/index_e.aspx
- *Mould Reporter (USA)* – <http://www.moldreporter.org>
- *Save Family Treasures from Soot (USA)* – www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/TFsoot.HTM
- *Hurricane Damaged Records Recovery Information (USA)* – www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/DamagedRecordshandout.doc
- *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel (USA)* – www.heritageemergency.org