

Vital, valuable or vulnerable; the construction of priority salvage lists.

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Abstract

Of all of the aspects of disaster preparedness planning, it is arguably the preparation and maintenance of priority lists that taxes an organisation the most. It is not unusual for organisations to have well established disaster plans and incomplete or out of date priority lists. The literature on preparedness planning however stresses the importance of priority lists leading to responses within organisations ranging from heart-ache to denial.

A number of pre-conditions are essential before an effective list can be compiled including a clear understanding by all stakeholders of the purpose of the list, an agreement on what criteria determine inclusion on the list and the flexibility to adapt the list to suit evolving circumstances. For these reasons it is hardly surprising that some organisations have chosen to either compile a number of simple formal and informal lists or to avoid a listing all together.

The purpose of priority lists.

Priority lists are generally compiled with one of two purposes in mind, as rescue lists or as salvage priority lists. In the former case the list is guidance for the removal of key material in advance of an expected disaster whereas salvage priority lists are used where the collection is assessed for recovery after a disaster.

Priority rescue lists have sometimes been misunderstood as the tactical response to an unfolding disaster, often one involving emergency evacuations. This can be a difficult misunderstanding to overcome since the thought of rescuing a threatened cultural icon in the face of flickering flames can excite the imagination. Emergency services personnel are generally horrified by such a suggestion and are quick to point out that an organisation would have serious difficulties explaining to a coroner the loss of life that occurred whilst rescue teams were attempting to retrieve the particular icon. Security personnel are also unexcited by the prospect of an organisation's staff walking out of a building during an evacuation with collection items under their arms (or in their pockets). There is a significant risk in such a scenario of collections continuing right on down the road. For this reason, all emergency evacuation training stipulates that only personal effects are to be taken and only if already at hand.

Such rescue lists are inevitably short listings of iconic and portable items. They are very rarely used since it's uncommon for disasters to signal their coming. Exceptions to this might be natural threats such as cyclones, flood threats and bushfires or extreme political events such as wars. If a risk assessment points the fickle finger of probability at these events then an institution would be derelict in not planning for them.

The vast majority of priority lists have been prepared to provide guidance in salvage planning for disasters. They are;

- used to direct salvage teams straight to material which must be salvaged first,

- not always for the most important/valuable/essential material but may focus on the most vulnerable
- generally dependent on the nature of the disaster/emergency.

In Business Continuity terms, the highest priority material is that which is essential for the continued operation of the organisation (generally that material which, if lost will cripple or kill the organisation). The next highest priority is that which will retard operations (usually a financial loss). In any organisation, there is a clear application of this principle to business or financial records. For most of the private sector therefore, the salvage priorities would predominantly concern their relation to customers. In the Chicago Loop flood of 1992, all of the basements of the central business district were flooded to a depth of up to twelve metres. Of the over two hundred businesses that were affected, the one hundred or so which went bankrupt were those who had made inadequate contingency for the security of their priority one records.

For cultural heritage collections a similar principle applies. The highest priority items are those which must be salvaged at all cost because they are

- vital and irreplaceable
- very vulnerable
- of very high monetary value and/or
- essential due to high usage demand.

Additionally, items which seem of relatively low priority may have a high priority because there are legal encumbrances on them, for example items on loan.

The next priority level is material which one would salvage if possible and the lowest is that which is salvaged only if it's economically practicable. This last group includes material which it might be cheaper to salvage than replace or material of low significance for which there are no multiples.

Various readily available plans and documents propose strategies for prioritising collections for disaster plans. "Be Prepared" the small museums' guidelines for preparedness planning at CAN (1), suggests that "significance" should be the guiding principle and refers the reader to the standardised methodology for significance assessment held at that website (2). The guidelines in "Be Prepared" wisely advise that the list be manageable in size and include essential information on accessing items which have particular security measures such as locks or the direct fixing of art works to walls.

The Getty's thorough and intensive emergency planning manual, "Building an Emergency Plan" (3) includes the prioritisation categories above but stresses loan items since these represent a contractual responsibility as well as a potential legal liability to the organization. The authors suggest that the priority list will be a fluid document that is determined by the exigencies of the incident. Salvage priorities will be dependent on the disaster; after a serious fire, the priority may actually be to leave damaged material for careful, considered salvage and evacuate all undamaged material as a first priority. Alternatively, in a water based disaster, the priority may be to leave undamaged material where it is and provide protection for it. As they point out, the general rule of thumb in any response situation is not to move objects unless necessary. To move collections in a way that is safe, secure and properly controlled would add a significant work load that may distract from a more practical and

appropriate response. The level of damage caused to a collection by charring or heavy soiling would certainly require careful and minimal handling. The Getty manual's authors also make a point of including vital organizational records in their counter-disaster plan. These include not only collection documentation but also financial, personnel, insurance and rental/lease records, hazardous materials listings, full plans of buildings, mechanical systems and utilities and details to allow rapid access to financial assets such as credit cards.

Despite these conspicuous examples of planning guides which have a museum focus, much of the available literature on disaster preparedness planning and the construction of priority lists is generated by the library and, to a lesser extent, the archives community. There is a practical reason for this; the vast majority of disasters encountered by cultural collecting institutions involve water and the material most adversely affected is paper-based or related media such as photographic, film and digital collections. The scale of recovery in such disasters can be crushing to the organisation involved particularly if the contingency planning is inadequate.

The real world.

How widely are priority lists actually used? How useful are they? A quick and dirty review of six Commonwealth cultural collecting institutions was carried out to gain a picture of the state of play regarding such lists. An individual was approached in each institution and asked a series of questions. Each respondent was an on-going staff member of their respective organisation, someone at the middle management level who would be in a position to know and influence the organisational procedures for disaster response. In an attempt to gain frank and candid comments, given the nature of the questions asked, the respondents and their respective institutions are left unnamed. To further obscure the organisations discussed, "curators" is used throughout to refer to those responsible for the cataloguing and development of the collections. There are clearly difficulties with any such questionnaire; some respondents may tend to embellish their organisation's accomplishments whereas others may be overly caustic at what they see as a lack of achievements. Either way the results of the questionnaire have proved enlightening.

A first group of questions was asked to establish the **base level situation** in each organisation.

Does the organisation have a priority list? One organisation had a well developed and systematically maintained list of long standing, two others appeared to have recently sorted out their list and the status of their lists were agreed; two more had incomplete lists or a multiplicity of lists where the status of these lists were not understood or agreed upon. The last institution chose not to go through the angst associated with compiling a priority list. Their management decision had been that their collection was of a size and nature that this would be a fruitless exercise.

What criteria determine inclusion on the list? The most common criteria were intrinsic value and significance. Icons lists were common and several institutions also put the focus on materials that were fundamental to the telling of key stories or for carrying out a proscribed mission. Three organisations had specifically included vulnerability as a consideration in their listings.

The Conservation section of one of these had recourse to an unofficial listing based on a vulnerability checklist adapted from Betty Walsh's salvage priorities documents (4).

Are there priority lists for organisational documents; for vital records including personnel and financial records? This question caused considerable confusion; no respondent had considered that the salvage process might include their teams in the salvage of vital and confidential organisational records. These were seen to be a responsibility of the business continuity planning process.

Does the organisation have more than one category of list, i.e. different lists for different contingencies? Of the five organisations that had priority lists, two had no lists for alternate contingencies. The other three suggested they would rely on the professionalism of their trained recovery staff to provide an assessment based on the reaction phase of their disaster response. These three also had formal or informal lists with items categorised according to their vulnerabilities.

Has the organisation established a relationship with emergency services and has the priority list system been explained to them? Are maps used? All organisations had periodic visits from the fire brigade and provided general guidance on the issues relating to their collections. Two took care to ensure that emergency services were aware of vault storage with one ensuring that maps and documentation are held securely and readily available to responding emergency services staff.

Is the listing also treated as a value-added exercise? The one organisation with a well established listing used each revision as a tool for reassessing their preservation priorities. One of those with multiple lists used them to inform their preservation activities but none of the other organisations did so. They viewed the priority list as deriving from valuations or preservation planning.

A further set of questions was used to establish the mechanics and effectiveness of the **implementation and maintenance** of priority lists:

How often is the list revised? Does maintenance happen as a scheduled activity; does it really happen? Of the three organisations that had formalised priority lists, only one appeared to have the review process systematically organised and regular although the other two were striving to at least maintain the currency of their lists. The difficulty appears to result from the need to involve curatorial areas in a decision making process that many of them find professionally anathema.

Who/what position is in charge of maintenance? One organisation had placed responsibility for the list at branch head level although in most cases responsibility resided at the section head level. Given the spectrum of organisations surveyed, not all of them had registration sections; those without had the onus of pushing list maintenance as a conservation responsibility. Of the four organisations which did have registration sections, the responsibility for list maintenance was spread between them and conservation staff.

Do curatorial areas fully understand the purpose of the list? Not surprisingly, the one organisation which had the listing process well established confirmed that their curatorial staff were well aware of the purpose of the list. All other organisations had some difficulties; one respondent described curators as resenting such a “threatening symbolic process”.

What security controls govern the list? Is it stored as hard copy or electronically? All five organisations that had lists, held hard copies at multiple sites. Two organisations utilised their collection management system (CMS) directly to generate lists linked to collection entries and three had no such provision on their CMS or chose not to use it.

Is the priority list a single list or is it broken into graded priority listings? Four organisations had at least 2 levels of priority although one which had four levels said that only two levels were really relevant. The numbers of items in those listings varied enormously from one organisation to the next.

What is the list's relationship to the disaster plan and does the plan allow for deviation in application of that list? Two respondents were unclear if variation of the list was possible and not sure that the plan would allow it. One said that the listing was fixed irrespective of the nature of the disaster; another stated that it allowed for variation depending on the nature of the threat or disaster and the last respondent said that the listing was so loosely connected to their plan that they had flexibility to exercise professional judgment, again depending on the threat.

Does the priority list work; has it been used in exercises or in emergencies? No organisation had tested their priority list in a scenario. One organisation carried out response tests on scenarios involving the limited lists for major indemnified loans.

Does the list include loan items and items awaiting acquisition assessment? If not, are these items the subject of a separate list? All five with priority listings included exhibition loan items, particularly indemnified loans, on their priority listings. However for some of the organisations, small loans (particularly non exhibition loans) and items temporarily held for pre-acquisition assessments are a large part of the total loan volume. These materials are generally poorly covered by priority listings in spite of the possible legal ramifications of loss. One institution did have an awareness of the risk with the respondent advising that this weakness had been identified in their business continuity planning process. Another respondent firmly placed these items as the responsibility of the curatorial areas holding them. One organisation had a large number of temporary loans of photographic material for image capture subsequent to which they returned the originals. Although their CMS tracked the item's arrival and departure against the accession number affixed to the image, there were problems in tracking the original's location and identity without creating large numbers of redundant records and labeling the item itself. The risk of loss through disaster were appreciated but the issue had not yet been resolved.

Some further comments that arose from the questionnaire are;

- There is a need to consider security issues for classified materials and how salvage teams can overcome those difficulties.
- The salvage of large, heavy, high priority items can be complex. One institution had such material that was very vulnerable to fire and water damage but was stored in a way that fork-lift access would be required for salvage.
- The need to highlight those collection items which constitute a hazard under certain disaster conditions, for example materials that react dangerously in fires.
- It's common for organisations to do salvage team training and some even do the high level emergency management team training however none seem to have done any mid level scenario training for salvage managers using the priority list. It was acknowledged that this would be useful in scenarios where the priority list itself is put under pressure.
- No organisation had fully resolved the issue of loans and pre-acquisition materials. A vulnerability expressed by one institution was the concern that

they sometimes borrowed materials that were radically different from the nature of their own collections and were not resourced to deal with in a potential salvage situation. Examples might be a museum borrowing illuminated parchment documents or an archive borrowing an ethnographic feathered head dress.

Location issues.

A Priority Salvage List is only useful if it's possible to generate a precise location for the item/group. The vast majority of disasters involve water damage so the assumption can be made that salvage decisions will most often involve priority decisions regarding water sensitive materials. The experiences of most organisations in incident response would appear to bear this out.

There are difficulties in priority listing material where the collection lacks discrete locations, where the CMS is not to the shelf/box level. An example could be archival collections where a whole class of material covers several bays but where the critical material constitutes only a couple of boxes within that collection. To identify a whole class of material as a priority quickly makes the priority list unmanageable.

A complication arises where a given space has very different collection materials with different sensitivities collocated. In this instance the relative sensitivities determine the priority so, for example, even though an area contains high value textile items and medium value film or sound material, their relative sensitivities to water could mean that the latter may require primary action.

For this reason, many organisations have compiled structured priority lists by location rather than collection type. In such a preventive approach, decision-making is based on a preservation matrix approach; the collection material in an area is tested against a risk/value matrix. This has the advantage that the compilers need to think about the risk profile of the area and they can use the matrices to work on strategies to minimise the risk status of identified priority one and two material. Boxing of material or reformatting could reduce the risk or impact of water or fire damage enough to push vulnerable items down the priority list. In this approach, the priority ratings may not directly reflect the financial or intellectual value of the listed material to the organisation.

The worst case scenario

One of the tragic scenarios that unfolded on the 15th of January, 2003, as the bushfires swept through Canberra was the destruction of the Australian National University's repository for the collections of the School of Archaeology and Natural History in the suburb of Weston. As Swete Kelly and Phear write in their paper on this disaster;

“The ANH storage facility was completely destroyed. It had been situated on the ground floor and directly above this were offices, which all but disintegrated. It was the roofing materials, primarily the insulation, and the internal furnishings that burnt first. However, the intensity of the fire was so high that the entire building was rapidly destroyed, leaving only the steel framework supporting the outer walls. Furthermore, additional damage was caused when water was dropped by helicopter on the smouldering post-fire ruins to prevent the spread of embers to nearby property. The reaction of the water hitting the hot concrete slab on the upper floor caused it to fracture and consequently the floor caved in above the Archaeology and Natural History stores.” (5, p3)

So far things are going badly, but what about the salvage? Kelly and Phear continue, “The university had prioritised the restoration of the intensively used astronomical facilities at nearby Mt Stromlo, which had also been destroyed, so it was almost six months before the slab was removed. When this had occurred, ANH was given the go-ahead to salvage the remaining collections” (5, p4).

This paper (5) and the two reports that it is based on (6) make for sobering reading on how ill-prepared an organisation can be for a disaster and how extreme the resulting salvage exercise can be. It is worth considering how priority lists might have been applied in this situation. One way in which they would have been invaluable is in precisely locating objects in space. The excavation of the site is hampered by a lack of documentation of the collections and the precise location of those collections. The resulting painstaking archaeological dig is exacerbated in scale by the lack of this basic information. It might be assumed that a priority salvage list might have been redundant in the face of such destruction however disaster planning and the attempt at compiling such a list would certainly have highlighted the documentation problems. Regrettably, many such small and poorly resourced collections continue to have such fundamental problems.

Conclusions

The experience of one of the six institutions shows that priority lists can become an accepted organisational procedure with regularity and reliability. The key influence in achieving compliance appears to be the organisational level from which the process is driven. Another organisation had recently driven the case for priority listing but appears to have a task ahead of it to maintain compliance. Many of the organisations had compiled listings at the operational level and maintained their listings by resorting to corporate memory and the use of professional savvy. Organisations appeared to have real difficulties in achieving a clarity of purpose in the minds of curatorial professionals as to the purpose and methodology of priority lists to the extent that one organisation appears to have chosen not to bother with the effort at all.

It was surprising how the practitioners in most organisations had not considered the salvage implications of vital records. It was concerning how little of the material temporarily in the care of each organisation was controlled for disaster purposes. It was certainly alarming that no organisation appears to have conducted scenario testing of the effectiveness of their priority lists.

The worst case scenario discussed shows that priority lists may appear to be redundant in extreme circumstances but the preparation and maintenance of priority lists does require a risk assessment and management approach. If nothing else, this imposes a discipline on an organisation which is concerned with the proper management and control of its collections.

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