

ASSESSING RISK IN YOUR COLLECTION

Performing a risk assessment is a useful exercise that should place you and your organisation in a better position to care for and safeguard collection material. Each time you catalogue an item, carry out a condition report, or change an item's storage or display arrangements, make sure that you conduct a risk assessment too. This should highlight threats to your collection items and help you to prioritise risk mitigation measures. Even a collection of seemingly robust items in perfect condition may be subject to harm from potential risks.

A risk assessment may therefore prompt you to consider some preservation concerns that you may not have considered before. This information sheet will guide you through some key steps to follow when performing an assessment for a single collection item. You may also wish to assess a small group of items, an entire collection, a whole building or a particular storage / display area using these guidelines. Whatever you are aiming to achieve, the essential considerations will be the same.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Assessing your collection for risk can quickly become an overwhelming job. You may identify many mitigation strategies for which your organisation may not have resources to enact. Remember that your allocation of resources should reflect not only the vulnerability of a collection item, but also its significance. In the event of an emergency, having a risk assessment means you won't have to do the thinking on the spot. A risk assessment will have prioritised the safeguarding of particular items, for example a series of letters might be prioritised based on their social value and high risk of damage by water.

Keep this consideration of significance in mind as you progress through the risk assessment. It should help you to digest the information and make the outcomes more realistic. For guidance on how to assess the significance of an item, check out the Victorian Collections information sheet *Significance in a Nutshell*.

The Victorian Collections catalogue has inbuilt **Risk Assessment** functionality to make this process easier for you. Just use the dropdown menus as you work through the process below:

1 IDENTIFY RISK TYPE

There are certain risks that are commonly hazardous for collection material. These are often called the **10 Agents of Deterioration**.

1. Physical Forces (eg. earthquakes, transportation damage or poor handling)
2. Fire (external; bushfires, internal; building fires)
3. Water (eg. from flood waters, plumbing issues or roof leaks)
4. Vandalism or Theft
5. Pest (eg. insects or rodents)
6. Contaminant (eg. inappropriate cleaning products, dust or air pollutants)
7. Light and UV (external; sunlight, internal; light bulbs)
8. Temperature (very high or very low temperatures)
9. Humidity (high or low humidity levels)
10. Custodial Neglect (eg. data loss or dissociation of an item from its associated information)

2 IDENTIFY RISK FACTOR

What is the probability of a risk occurring? What would be the likely degree of severity? Some risks will be less substantial and less likely to occur than others. These will not require the same level of attention and can be assigned a low Risk Factor. It is wise to focus on any high Risk Factors identified.

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3 IDENTIFY POTENTIAL LOSS IN VALUE

This step is often the most difficult. It should tie in with the over-arching principle of acknowledging significance. How significant is the item? Based on your assessment of significance, what would be the potential loss in value? The concept of value should not be restricted to a simple depreciation of financial value. An affected item may lose, for example, scientific research potential or artistic and aesthetic merit. Record any potential loss in value in the **Risk** section of Victorian Collections. This could be as simple as “Potential loss of value is high. This item has strong social value to the local community and could not be replaced monetarily.”

4 IDENTIFY IF THE RISK CAN BE MITIGATED

The Risk Mitigation section of your assessment is where you should identify possible actions to best preserve the item. Depending on the type of risk identified, this may involve organising building repairs, moving the item to another area of a room or building, consulting a conservator for treatment or making specific decisions to display, store or transport the item in a safer way.

5 PLAN HOW YOU WILL ADDRESS THE RISK

If you discern that a risk is substantial and the potential loss of value is high then you will likely be inspired to undertake actions that could minimise the risk. If it is possible to do so you may decide to take immediate action. However if this is not feasible at the time, you can always refer back to the information you captured during this assessment at a later date. The assessment can be very useful if, for example, you were to receive funding for preservation activities and need to decide where to best allocate these funds.

GLOSSARY

Risk: An action that would cause unwanted damage.

Risk Assessment: An assessment of the potential risks, their likelihood and severity, and the degree of potential value loss associated with a collection or item.

Risk Factor: The likelihood of a risk occurring and/or the severity of damage caused if the risk occurred.

FURTHER RESOURCES

10 Agents of Deterioration, Canadian Conservation Institute, <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/agents-deterioration.html>

Collection Risk Assessment Framework, National Film and Sound Archives, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/preservation-glossary/collection-risk-assessment-framework>

Assess and manage risks in collections care, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, SHARE Museums East and Collections Trust UK, <http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/How-to-Guides-Assess-and-Manage-Risk-in-Collections-Care.pdf>

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