The Most Important First Step In a Conservation Program Is ...

By Paul S. Koda

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What I would like to do is concentrate on a single important project that serves the following three purposes: First, it is a project that can be done by one person, who may be part-time or have limited time, and yet can be expanded as money and personnel become available; second, it should be a project that is beneficial for public, academic, school and special libraries, which covers everyone here today; and finally, it must be a project which ought to have high, if not the highest, priority.

I would like to discuss the need for and formation of a good disaster plan. Do you need a disaster plan? All of us remember the Florence flood of November 1966. You may also recall the flood at the Corning Glass firm, the fire at the Jewish Theological Center, and the fire at St. Louis Documents Center. I receive six to twelve telephone calls a year about various kinds of disaster. Recently a professor called to say that his books had been in a basement all summer long and had mold and mildew. What should he do? Last spring an attorney called from the western part of North Carolina and said a pipe burst in his office on Friday night (it is always on Friday night, never on Monday morning) and he had a water-logged law library. What to do? Last spring a music librarian called me and said her library had an infestation of termites; at least a dozen boxes and their contents had been destroyed. Fortunately, the boxes contained duplicates and there was no severe loss. (The termites were not very intelligent.)

Other library disasters in which I have been directly involved are: A stopped drain from which water leaked through a supposed sealed window into a special collection area, down two floors through the wall into an administrative office where large numbers of files were badly damaged. In the same library water from a flash flood penetrated a loading dock and soaked two floors of books. I remember a broken air-conditioning system in another library. No one had bothered to check the seventh floor of the library after the air conditioner went back on. Three months later, in a dark closed-off area, streamers of mold and mildew had grown like Spanish moss.

My point is that disasters happen to all of us; we cannot escape them. Every disaster such as fire, earthquake, hurricane, burst pipe, or termite infestation is overwhelming. They catch us by surprise and the psychological

impact is often devastating. How, then, do we begin dealing with a library disaster? There is a very important first crucial step, and it must be taken by everyone here. Monday morning, this coming Monday morning, each one of us should set aside twenty minutes for the following two tasks. First, schedule one hour a week, just one hour, Monday morning, Wednesday afternoon, or Friday noon, it makes no difference, set aside one inviolable hour to work on a disaster plan. Second, order the following four documents:

1. Hilda Bohem, *Disaster Prevention and Disaster Preparedness,*
2. John Martin, *The Corning Flood: Museum Under Water,*
3. Robert Matthai, *Protection of Cultural Properties During Energy Emergencies,* and
4. Peter Waters, *Procedures for Salvage of Waterdamaged Library Materials.*[1]

They should always be available in your library in several copies.

We have taken the initial step in accomplishing the three major goals in setting up an effective diasaster plan: PREVENTION, PREPARATION, and PROMPT ACTION.

Prevention

Let me discuss *prevention* first. We cannot prevent a hurricane or lightning striking; nor can we move our library out of the valley in which it is built. But we can prevent the failure of man made objects like pipes, drains, electrical circuits as well as correct the poor storage of chemicals. We can do this in very old buildings and we can do this in library buildings constructed just last year.

The key to prevention is information. If necessary, we can design and fill out checklists that collect facts. What is important about our information is that it be accurate. Do not accept hearsay evidence, rumor, or what has been accepted for the past several years. It is your job, and it is my job to determine the actual situation.

Helpful Persons

In gathering information we can use the old standard formula of Who? What? Where? When? and How? First, who? All kinds of persons may be sources of accurate information: colleagues in the library; persons employed in our institutions; local or regional persons who may or may not be librarians. We can even use family and friends. In the beginning it is important to get your supervisor on your side. Get his or her support and ask for names of important persons to contact for information. At this time you may want to form a committee. Put persons on the committee who are knowing about conservation or related areas. For example, someone who is familiar with microfilming; a serials librarian; persons who maintain the physical plant of the library; persons from the business office; and, of course, reference librarians. They all know a great deal about what's happening in the library.

Other persons in the institution may be of equal help. Speak to the supervisor of your physical plant. Ask him to get involved, or to suggest people like plumbers, electricians, and grounds keepers. They are all persons you will have to know in constructing a disaster plan. What about persons from the planning office in your college or university. Do they employ architects? If you are a small library, is there a planning office in the municipal offices of your town?

Persons outside your institution that might be helpful are fire protection and prevention inspectors, town and city building inspectors, and insurance employees. All of them are potential resource persons. It is best to use them only when research has not turned up the required information, or when information is needed about a library, or when particular problems about the library arise.

Kinds of Information Needed

Next, what? What kind of information will be required? Two areas should be remembered: First, conservation literature; and second, knowledge about our own physical facilities. There are a great deal of conservation literature to be found in a variety of places, and I only have time to mention a few sources. An obvious one is *Library Literature.* Equally important are *Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts* and George Cunha's *Conservation of Library Materials: A Manual and Bibliography on The Care, Repair and Restoration of Library Materials.*[2]

Information about conservation literature is one-half of what should be known. There is an equal need for information about our own physical facilities. What do we know about the structure of our building? Is it brick? Limestone? Does it have steel beams? Or is there something else supporting it? What about the plumbing? Where are the pipes and the drains? Their condition? Wiring implies the same questions: Where are the main circuits? Condition? Are there storage areas in custodial services: Who does it? Who is their supervisor? What knowledge do they have of conservation? An important source of information for disaster prevention can be gotten from persons who maintain the building. They see every corner of the building every day — they are an excellent "early warning system."

Then, where? Disasters can affect nearly every part of a library and every book or manuscript in a library. It is important to look at the library from the top, the roof, to the bottom, the subbasement; from the inside and from the outside. It is important to walk around outside the library from three feet away to a hundred yards away. Have there been flood problems in the area during the past decades?

Periodic Review

And, when? All disaster plans are closely involved with time. We should have finished our disaster plan months ago. Now is the time to begin, but plans should not be developed hastily. Once compiled, they should be reviewed periodically at specifically scheduled times. It is a good idea to set up a schedule for a year, so time-related reviews and tasks can be done month by month, and year by year. Let me offer examples for a possible calendar:

1. September through April; Check for beginning water problems after each major rain, include inspections of drains and sewers,
2. June: Submit a budget,
3. July: Examine all supplies and equipment, restock and refurbish where necessary,
4. May through August: Look for insects,
5. Fourth Thursday of every month: Check with key people about what they have observed and ask them to look for specific things like swelled pipes or insects.

So it goes. The calendar can be as thin or as dense with activities as one likes. But it is crucial because it forces the persons responsible for conservation to review continuously and regularly in order to find potential problems. It also eliminates the need for remembering many tasks at one time and serves as an automatic check of completed reviews and tasks.

All of this seems overwhelming and complicated. This brings me to the "how" of disaster planning. Once again, a cliche will describe the best method —divide and conquer. It is better to have an abbreviated plan that deals adequately with one kind of disaster than a comprehensive plan that deals with nothing adequately. Trying to understand everything about the physical library, its building and its collections, is much too difficult in the beginning. Divide up the tasks into smaller units. A series of small steps makes the building of the disaster plan effective. As you proceed, you will quickly find out what the priorities are for what should be done.

Take fire hoses as an example. Just finding out where they are and telling other people about them is an effective first step. I chose fire hoses because we have an interesting situation in our library. The first part of the library was built in 1929. Next year it is having its fiftieth anniversary. Our fire hoses were also going to have their fiftieth anniversary. But a few years ago the new librarian decided to take a fire hose out of its receptacle and stretch it across the floor. It seemed the termites got there first. The point is that it was the "fresh" eye of the new librarian who saw the problem. We should always look at our libraries with fresh eyes so we can spot and correct potential problems. And it is these discrete steps that add up to comprehensive disaster preparedness.

There are many parts of a library that could be discussed with regard to prevention, but I would like to take up a single one to illustrate how one can begin thinking about prevention. I would like to mention the simple, ordinary drain. I have seen many drainage problems in libraries. This is a top to bottom issue and some of the questions that come to mind are: When was the last time the roof was inspected? By whom? Did you crawl out there with the person who inspected it? What is the life expectancy of the roof? What is the condition of the gutters and downspouts? If they fail, where is the water going to go? Have there been any problems with drainage around the building? Can you trace the water-paths if drains and gutters fail? What is located in those paths? Can you rearrange your library so that an open window will not damage manuscripts? For information, ask people who have worked in the library for a long time and read the annual reports for the past several years. If

there have been problems, what was done and what funds were used to solve those problems? Maybe you can use the same source of money again. I think you get the idea.

Preparation

As much as we would not like to have disasters and as much as we would like to prevent them, they will happen. This means we should be prepared. *Preparation*, as I have already mentioned, is the second major element in every disaster plan. It is a natural and rational outgrowth of prevention and can be seen as a three-part project. First of all, necessary equipment and supplies have to be at hand. Second, one requires knowledge of the availability of resources, persons and materials. Third, and most important, is the formation of a disaster team and adequate training of the members of the disaster team.

What kind of equipment and supplies are needed? A few of them are fire extinguishers, plastic sheets and bags, portable generators, fans, fumigation equipment, gloves, smocks, paper towels, newsprint, and lists of telephone numbers.[3]

Preparation will mean that these items will be stored strategically around the library. If there is only one generator and it is five feet under water after a flood, it will be difficult to start. My point is that duplicate supplies and equipment must be stored around the building as well as outside the building.

Whether or not resources are available is the second important consideration in preparation. If supplies run out, where can they be obtained quickly? Are they available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? One has to know where to get the materials on extremely short notice. And the availability of materials from these resources has to be confirmed regularly so one is not caught unprepared when a disaster does happen.

More important than supplies and equipment are people. They are the key in dealing with a disaster successfully. The most important person is the experienced conservator who has handled disasters in the past. Hilda Bohem listed several, but you may want to remember only one or two.[4] If you do not do anything else, make a copy of her list and keep it in your desk. Give a copy to your supervisor, to the head librarian, to the chief of police, to the fire department, and to persons at home. Let others know about it.

The second most important person is a public health official. Frequently in disasters there are emergency health problems. Floods can increase the incidence of disease considerably, so a public health officer should be on the scene as soon as possible to give advice and direction.

The third part of preparation is the formation of a disaster team and adequate training for the members of the team. These are persons who have to be ready to step in at a moment's notice. If possible, they must train for every kind of disaster that will occur in a library. They should also have the authority to take charge — authority that has been cleared through the head librarian and appropriate municipal or university officials. It is no use having a "well-meaning" bureaucrat get in your way when you are trying to rescue a library. Even the director of the library may be a hindrance. And every

member of the disaster team must have a backup person to fill their position.

The most crucial member of the team is the team leader. One person must have the sole authority in a recovery operation. Even though that person will make mistakes, it is a good idea to have a single authority, because he or she can accomplish a great deal of good in a short amount of time. The team leader should have access to a budget that can be spent without clearance. In no way is one going to get the kind of equipment and help needed by using ordinary purchasing procedures. An adequate amount of money and the authority to use it quickly should be available for the team leader.

Library disaster teams should train, retrain, and practice all the time. They should review and update the disaster plan; keep the entire library and key people in administration informed of their activities; and engage in continuing education for themselves and for new staff members of the library.

The Need for Prompt Action

Once prevention and preparation have been taken care of there is the third major concern — *prompt action*. Practice and training will speed things up considerably, yet prompt action depends also on other important activities. Let me give some examples. How fast will the team leader or members of the team find out about the disaster? One needs as close a link as possible with the police or guards who are likely to be on the scene early or even discover the disaster. They should report it to the disaster team. Team members, and especially the leader, should be able to get to the disaster fast. If you are a team member or a team leader and your car is being repaired, what are you going to do? This points out the need for contingency plans for each member of the disaster team. How are the members of the disaster team to be identified and distinguished from curiosity seekers on the scene? Do civil authorities know about marks or badges of identification? Does each member of the team have an emergency kit that contains basic information and supplies, which they carry with them and which can be used immediately. All of this, too, seems like too much to do, but I think a rational step-at-a-time program can set it up and save a library.

Allow me to develop an example of how prevention, preparation, and prompt action can be accomplished. This is only one very small part of a comprehensive disaster program. But it is not so small when one thinks about it carefully.

Let me now turn to the noble fire extinguisher. In itself, a fire extinguisher is to be used to prevent the spread of flames. But is it needed in that part of the library? Is it ready to work? Has it been inspected recently? Has anyone taken a look at the inspection tag on a fire extinguisher? When? Did you question the inspector? What is he doing with it anyway? And how does he inspect it? And if we find out how he inspects it, perhaps we can judge whether the next inspector is doing a proper job. Is the fire extinguisher better for one kind of fire than for another?

Let's turn to preparation. Who had read the instructions on how to use a fire extinguisher? Even if you have had a speed-reading course, it is too late to

begin reading the instructions when the fire is coming up around your shoulders. Is the fire extinguisher too heavy? Some of us are built more like Woody Allen than Charles Atlas. Does the release mechanism take much strength or cleverness? If so, chances are it is going to be dropped (perhaps on a foot), and it is not going to be used for what it is designed to be used for. How is it held? Who has tried to use it? Or test one?

Prompt action is the next consideration. Where is the fire extinguisher located? Is it too high? Too low? Is it behind a partition? Has someone put it in a closet? Is one person supposed to use it? Or is everyone trained to use it? When is it supposed to be used? Before or after other emergency measures are taken? Before you telephone the fire department or after you telephone the fire department? Does everyone in the area know what to do with it?

This is one single object in our library. It has nothing to do with drains; it is just a fire extinguisher, usually colored red. It is a small item in an effective disaster plan. Everyone of us, you and me, Monday morning, should take a look around and see if it's there and whether it has been inspected and how it is used.

The primary purpose of a disaster plan is to provide the most effective means of saving a library and its contents when an emergency arises. If it is never used — and I hope none ever has to be used — it can be enormously beneficial by making everyone aware of the physical importance of collections. This increased sensitivity will, in turn, aid in building comprehensive conservation programs which will insure that books, manuscripts and materials, which can never be replaced, will be available for students and scholars in the future.

Mr. Koda is in the Rare Book Collection, Wilson Library, UNC-CH.

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[1]*Bohem, Hilda. *Disaster Prevention and Disaster Preparedness*. Berkeley: University of California (Library Plans and Policies), 1978.

Martin, John H., ed., *The Corning Flood: Museum Under Water*. Corning: 1977.

Matthai, Robert A., ed. *Protection of Cultural Properties During Energy Emergencies*. New York: Energy Information Clearinghouse, 1978.

*Waters, Peter. *Procedures for Salvage of Waterdamaged Library Materials*. Washington: Library of Congress, 1975.

*The best works written on the subject and must for every library.

[2]Metuchen, 1971-72, 2 vols.

At the present time most of the literature about preservation has been written by persons outside the library world. An important body of information, for example, is available from museum and archival literature; also, technical writing from areas like paper chemistry can be helpful. More information should be available from two projected works. The first is a bibliography being compiled by Paul N. Banks and Susan R. Thompson; the second is a proposed newsletter *CAN* (Conservation Administrators Newsletter) that hopes to address both theoretical and practical issues but mainly serve as a means for disseminating information.

[3]See Hilda Bohem's *Disaster Prevention and Disaster Preparedness* (Berkeley, 1978) for a complete list of necessary supplies and equipment. It should be remembered that both materials and plans should be "tailored" to an individual library to be most effective.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 19.