



Hazards in museum collections

Undertaking a hazards survey, where to start and what to do next

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Don't panic!



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Why are you carrying out the survey.

- ? To identify unknown but suspected hazards
- ? To provide guidelines for working (current or forthcoming)
- ? Part of a specific project or more of a general hazards auditing process
- ? As a reaction to an incident
- ? Comply with regulations

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What have you got in your collections

- Do you know for sure there are hazards?
 - Have you come across any?
 - What is the potential for a collection to contain hazardous material? Some collections are more hazard dense than others
- examples:
- Ethnographic arrows or darts from **Americas or areas of Africa** – high potential for them to be poisoned.
 - Lots of early 20C painted tin toys – likely to be lead paint.
 - Mineral collections often high possibility of hazards
 - Scientific/engineering based instruments containing mercury

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What have you got in your collections

Become familiar with the general content of the collection under scrutiny

What are the potential hazards within this collection? List them.

Make a list of object types that potentially contain these hazardous material within *your* collections.

Work through logically, hazard by hazard – is it relevant to these materials or objects. Easy to discount a lot of potentially hazardous materials at this stage

Cross reference this list with your collections lists.

You will end up with a list of potentially hazardous items.

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To assume or not to assume

- Best to take an assumptive stance, assume there is a hazard until it has been crossed off the list.
- Use appropriate PPE when considering handing these items until fully investigated.



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What next

You know what you think you have – read around the subject. Gain a basic appreciation for the risks involved with the specific hazardous materials that may affect you.

- Draw up some hazard data sheets
- Carry out appropriate risk assessments; handling, repackaging, cleaning objects
- Draw up working guidelines to keep staff and objects safe. Make it simple and relevant.
- Think of what to do with any potentially contaminated packing materials
- Set up a triage kit to isolate problem items

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Keep it relevant.

- Easy to get carried away so do maintain a healthy sense of perspective
- Is all of the hazard data relevant to what you are doing. The degree of hazard is often tiered depending on the task. For example some minerals are classified as hazardous but only if finely ground. It's good to be aware of this but is anything you are going to be doing to this item require that level of consideration?
- No one has the time or money to waste on overly complex and expensive mechanisms for coping with hazards, it doesn't need to be over the top.
- Identify serious problems and think about getting a specialist in. Firearms, live rounds, radioactive material.
- In such cases, identify how to stay safe and then know who you need to call.
- Know when to panic – carefully and in a sensible manner of course!

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Work out a plan of action

What needs doing?

It might be different for different collections

- Labelling, possibly a 3 tier warning system, database, box, object.
- Re-packaging
- Sampling and testing (e.g. historic pesticides saturating paper or atomising around the collection)
- Rehousing
- Updating the collections database
- Front desk guidelines? (do you get a lot of objects dropped in for I.D. for example)



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Examples of labelling

Radioactive mineral store

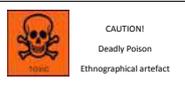


Mineral labels



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Poisoned arrows – new boxes



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Who will do this work

- Museum staff
- Volunteers
- A conservator
- Specialist professional (conservator, radiation protection supervisor, specific materials/hazard specialist)
- All of the above.

Decide on a suitable way of communicating the risks to each group.

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Thank you

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