



Intermountain Region Museum Services Program

Two Conservators, Ten Million Objects  
Advancing Conservation within the Intermountain Region of the National Park Service

Brynn Bender and Dana K. Senge

Introduction

The conservation program of the National Park Service’s Intermountain Region Museum Services Program is designed to support the preservation of museum collections in its eight states of Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma.



There are 90 parks in the region with a wide range of collection materials from historic, artistic and archeological provenance adding up to over 10 million items. Approximately 5.5 million are stored at the Western Archeological and Conservation Center, the physical home of the conservation labs. The remainder are stored and exhibited at parks and repositories throughout the region. The conservation team, consisting of two National Park Service conservators and two additional project staff, is active both in-house and onsite at parks to address conservation and preservation issues.

Park collections are managed by curators, museum technicians, archeologists, cultural resource managers or collateral duty staff from other areas of the park. With such a range of experience and training, the approaches to outreach and advocacy varies from park to park.

Outreach

Outreach is a major part of the daily lives of the conservation team, addressing needs large and small. These needs range from the preventive conservation of a single object to the conservation treatment of hundreds of objects within a collection.

As with many museums, successful outreach of conservation and preservation within the Intermountain Region of the National Park Service is achieved through:

- Cultivating relationships and trust between curators and conservators
- Improving communication and education
- Collaborating with other programs, specialists, and project designers, all the while remaining receptive and flexible to the specific assets or limitations of the individual park.

An ongoing challenge to outreach within the park service is the movement of staff between parks throughout the country. These promotions or transfers often mean that project leadership can change mid way through a process, thus focus may shift as well. Outreach has to include updates and review for new team members to ensure collections are cared for, even as new focus and ideas are introduced by leadership.

Education is a major component of outreach within our program. Opportunities to educate include answering individual questions on a regular basis and providing more formal training opportunities through workshops and on site work projects. The conservation team may join park staff for large projects, such as designing a packing strategy and providing guidance for moving a collection. During these types of projects, the conservation team often assists onsite with the most difficult issues or most sensitive objects.



Assistant Conservator, Dana Senge, surveying collections of Chaco Cultural National Park. The data gathered will be used to build projects and prioritize needs of the collections. Photo by Audrey Harrison.



Project Technician, Audrey Harrison, teaching the collections staff at Mesa Verde National Park about designing storage supports while improving storage of delicate vegetal material in the archeological collections. Photo by Dana Senge.



Senior Conservator, Brynn Bender, designing packing solutions for baskets onsite at Grand Teton National Park. The conservation team worked with collections staff from Grand Teton National Park as well as additional collections staff from nearby parks to prepare 700 collection items to move from the park to WACC for conservation and short term storage. Photo by Dana Senge.



Project Conservator, Maggie Kipling, working with NPS collections staff to pack collections for transit to WACC for conservation and short term storage. Photo by Dana Senge.

Advocacy

Recommendations from the conservators are often used by park staff to advocate for special projects that will improve preservation of the collections. In most parks, the leadership is making decisions about many different issues, including: natural resources, cultural resources, visitor support and park maintenance. Curators have to advocate for the needs of their collection amongst a crowded field of important, urgent issues. As the conservation team surveys materials at a park we are able to guide the curatorial staff in prioritizing conservation needs and back up recommendations with strong data about their collections. Through this work we are able to help develop and implement projects that improve the overall stability of the collections in the region.

In addition to working with parks on an individual level, we are able to identify issues that exist beyond the park boundary, trends that exist throughout a climate or the whole region. As part of the regional Museum Services Program, we are able to recognize and advocate for strategies that may address the preservation needs at several parks.

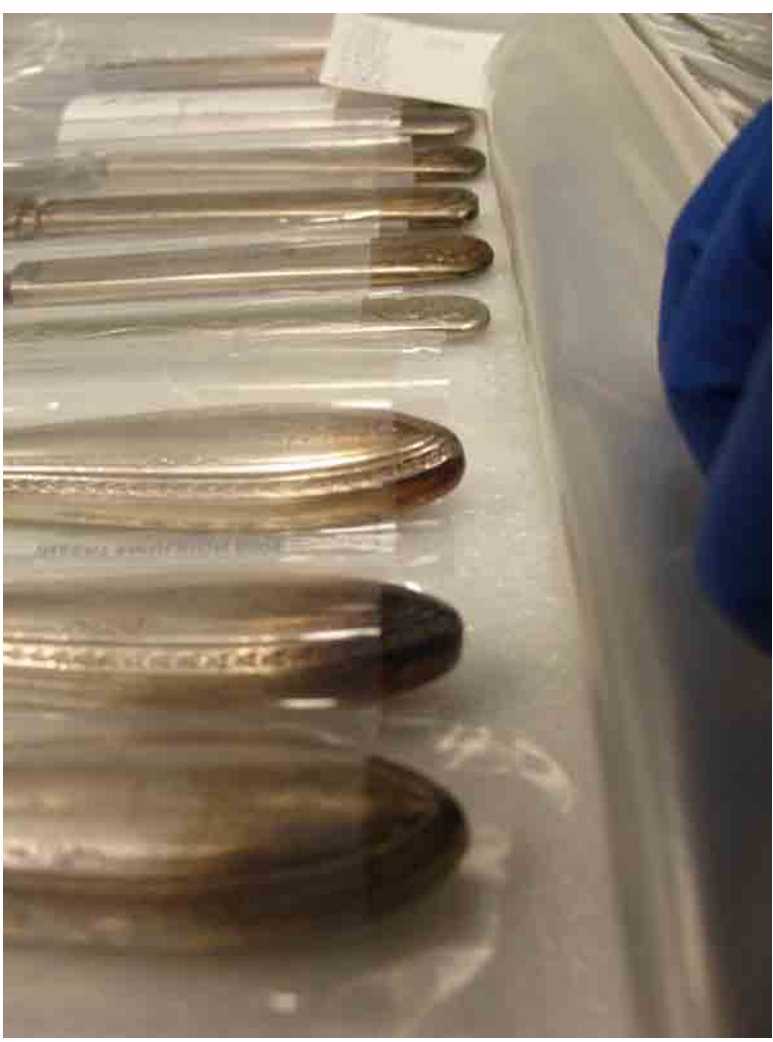
Overall we have found that successful outreach and advocacy requires a recognition of individual needs rather than a formulaic approach (just as in conservation treatment!). This requires listening, collaborating with park staff, accommodating individual needs, knowledge of park issues and experience of the people involved.

An example of examining trends across the region is the ongoing assessment of metal objects. Of course, metal artifacts large and small are stored in different conditions throughout the region, some in very arid outdoor environments and others indoors in historic structures in somewhat humid environments.

Our first action is to guide curators in the care for these materials at their individual parks through preventive measures and treatment. Our next is to examine trends across the region and suggest programs or approaches to care and maintenance of these materials. One of our goals is to streamline the approaches to these materials to help individual parks receive funding to meet the needs of their metal collections.



Steam Engine at Big Bend National Park in Texas. Much of the original coating and some of the primer has been worn away by wind blowing sand. Photo by Dana K. Senge



Silverware at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Montana. Polyethylene sleeves protect much of the silver, but not all. Photo by Brynn Bender.



Sample of microclimate storage boxes for metals artifacts that are regularly accessed by researchers. Photo by Dana K. Senge

Conclusion:

Outreach and advocacy are a major part of the daily lives of the conservation team and includes regular conversations with park museum staff to discuss issues large and small, from working with environmental dataloggers, to preparing for exhibits, to preparing for the move of 1 million objects.

The position of the conservation program within the regional structure of the National Park Service allows outreach and advocacy to exist on many levels including: open communication with an individual park regarding collection needs, identifying trends across parks to address a greater need, and participating on multidisciplinary teams to advocate for preservation. Through our work reaching out to parks to address preservation issues or playing a supporting advocate role for the park museum staff, the conservation team continues to develop improved methods of outreach and advocacy for conservation and preservation within the Intermountain Region of the National Park Service.

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