

Responsible Stewardship: Exploring Sustainability within Conservation

The field of conservation and the environment both require responsible stewardship. The care of an artifact should not come at the undue expense of the environment. How has the field of conservation already acknowledged this relationship? How can conservators work towards this through changes in practices and in the materials used?



Is sustainability important in conservation?

“There is little point in preserving collections for posterity if survival of future generations is under threat or the cultural heritage is at risk from environmental catastrophes.”

Sarah Brophy and Elizabeth Wylie, “It’s Easy Being Green – Museums and the Green Movement,” *Museum News*, September/October 2006, 85, no. 5: 38-45.

It is often mentioned how we must care for objects and collections **in perpetuity**, which means the future of the building, its surroundings and caregivers are all considered when making decisions today. This facet of conservation is difficult to see, since there is no tangible, immediate reward in disaster prevention, but **preparedness is an ethical responsibility**, and our professional ethics form the backbone of what we do.

“The conservation professional shall practice in a manner that minimizes personal risks and hazards to co-workers, the public, and the environment.”

The American Institute for Conservation’s 12th Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice, approved in 1994.

“The conservation professional should use methods and materials that are the least harmful to health and to the environment.”

Commentary 4a on Health and Safety from the American Institute for Conservation’s Commentaries to the Guidelines for Practice, approved in 1998.

“Our world’s cultural legacy, like its environment, is precious and fragile, and both require responsible stewardship.”

Robert Koestler, Director and Chief Scientist of the Museum Conservation Institute Smithsonian Institution, from the Institute’s Strategic Plan for 2007-2017.

“The Conservator-Restorer shall strive to use only products, materials and procedures which, according to the current level of knowledge, will not harm the cultural heritage, the environment or people.”

As stated in both the Professional Guidelines of the UK’s Institute of Conservation and the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers’ Organisations.

Natural Disasters and Museums

“The severity of floods and other natural disasters is widely seen as a product of global climate change, in turn a result of poor environmental practice”

“Think of it as the ultimate in preservation conservation.”

Sarah Brophy and Elizabeth Wylie, *The Green Museum: A Primer on Environmental Practice* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008), 5.



Clockwise from top right: National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey and The 9/11 Museum, both affected by Hurricane Sandy in 2012; a WWII museum ship in the Mississippi River during a 2012 drought; Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston, Texas after Hurricane Ike in 2008.



Sustainable Conservation Materials

“How can something be high-quality if it destroys the planet or makes people sick?”

American Alliance of Museums. “Green Machine: An Interview with Architect and Industrialist William McDonough.” *Museum – American Association of Museums*, November/December 2008, 87, no. 6: 54-61.

A sustainable conservation material is difficult to define. The unifying quality of all conservation materials is long-term chemical stability, meaning they will not contribute additional pollutants to the environment and will not auto-degrade. Sustainability can come in many forms; any aspect that is influenced by the care or concern for the environment can be considered sustainable. AIC’s 1st and 6th Code of Ethic and Guideline for Practice can be used to help frame what a sustainable conservation materials needs to be:

- I. The conservation professional shall strive to attain the highest possible standards in all aspects of conservation.
- VI. The conservation professional must strive to select methods and materials that, to the best of current knowledge, do not adversely affect cultural property or its future examination, scientific investigation, treatment, or function.

Considering this a sustainable conservation material must have two traits.

1. It must match or exceed the positive aspects of the material that would otherwise be used.
2. It must have some sustainable aspect in its production or processing.

Note: Sustainability and museum-quality materials is explored in depth by the author in his thesis. Seven more materials were also tested along with the two listed.

If you would like to see the research in its entirety, request a copy through email at cmhyyz@gmail.com.

Oddy Testing Sustainable Materials

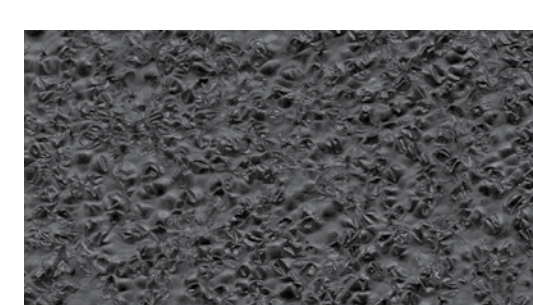
In exploring sustainability within conservation, sustainable materials were sought and tested against their known counterparts. For this research sustainable collections care materials was the focus and all sustainable materials tested were partially or fully made from recycled materials.

Three groups of materials - foams, cellulose boards and polypropylene boards - were tested by the author. The foams tested were of the Ethafoam® family of materials, which are in their own way sustainable since they are manufactured with many sustainable considerations, including minimizing energy and water use. (“Sealed Air Ethafoam® MRC & HRC® and Stratocell RC: Infinite Usage, Infinite Uses.” <http://www.sealedairprotects.com/la/es/pdf/recycled-foams.pdf>)



Ethafoam® 220

Manufactured by SealedAir, this material is a white polyethylene foam commonly used in mount making and shipping. It is made from virgin polyethylene resin.



Ethafoam® MRC® (Maximum Recycled Content)

Manufactured by SealedAir, this material is made from 100% recycled polyethylene resin, harvested within the company and from distributors. This material has the same working qualities as Ethafoam® 220 and is different only in color.

Both materials passed an Oddy Test and Ethafoam® MRC® passed a second Oddy Test.

Since it meets the widely accepted standard for testing materials used in conservation, the results of these tests indicate that a material may be both safe for use in conservation and made from recycled source material

	Copper	Lead	Silver
Test 1			
Control			
Ethafoam® 220			
Ethafoam® MRC®			
Test 2			
Control			
Ethafoam® MRC®			

Sustainable Conservation Practices

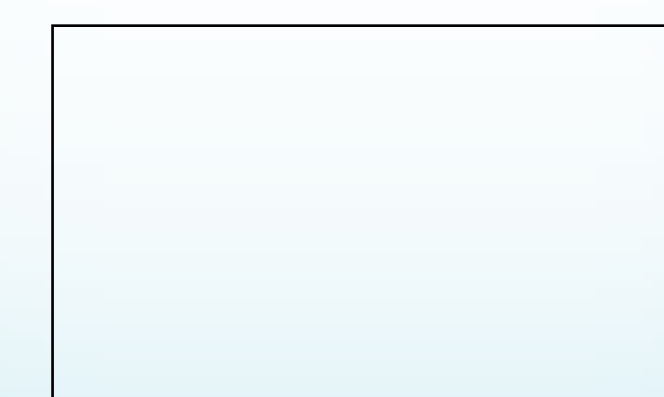
In the name of conservation, we use energy, water, chemicals, materials, and produce waste as conservators, but this can change. For example the washing of textiles can be made more sustainable by using an electrodeionizer of water, which produces little waste and uses little energy; by choosing a surfactant that does not harm the environment when released with wastewater (this can be done by consulting the Material Safety Data Sheet); and reusing drying cloths. Due to space limitations sustainable conservation practices will not be thoroughly explored in this poster. For more information on sustainable conservation consult AIC’s **Committee of Sustainable Conservation Practices**.

Christian is a textile conservation graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology. He currently lives in New York and is looking to relocate to Boston. His thesis was on sustainable collections care practices and materials. His passion is in collections care, conservation and textiles.



He has previously interned at the Textile Conservation Lab at St. John the Divine, the Hispanic Society of America, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. He is an incoming member of the Committee on Sustainable Conservation Practices.

Feel free to contact him at cmhyyz@gmail.com.



At the heart of both conservation and sustainable thinking is taking the short and long-term effects of our actions into account. The long-term health of the environment ensures that there are still people to appreciate and care for cultural heritage as well as a place for those who create it. **What we do today affects tomorrow.**