

Cowboy Conservation: Treatment of a Taxidermy Leatherback Turtle in Cordova, Alaska

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The Project: In 1963 an unexpected visitor to the frigid waters of Prince William Sound near Cordova, Alaska became entangled in a local fisherman's net - a 600 pound leatherback sea turtle. The turtle was so unusual for the area that it was preserved by a local taxidermist and given to the Cordova Historical Museum where it has been continually on display, garnering the love of local school children and town folk who officially named it "Prince Willy." The museum is moving into a new facility and the aging Prince Willy required four weeks' worth of treatment to prepare it for the move. The Museum was one of three to participate in a cooperative grant-funded project sponsored by the Museums Alaska Collections Management Fund to conserve specimens at the participating museums.

Condition Concern #1: Leaking rancid turtle oil. The oil-saturated carapace of leatherbacks is notoriously difficult to degrease, especially if not cleaned properly before mounting. In the 1990's this specimen was repositioned to a vertical display and began leaking oil from its underside (plastron) seams.



Oil leaking from turtle onto museum display

Treatment Solution #1: Remove bulk oil with paint scraper, then ethanol-soaked cotton swabs. The oil was "fresh" enough for easy removal, but will continue to leak in perpetuity, especially if displayed near a heat source.



Above: Scraped oil hanging from the underside during removal.



Below: After treatment.



Above: Museum volunteers helped remove the heavy specimen from the wall and prop it onto risers, allowing access to the underside for scraping the oil and further treatment.

Condition Concern #2: Flaking unnatural taxidermist paint. Living leatherbacks have white markings over their bodies that fade after death. To recreate this look the taxidermist painted an overall black layer, then haphazard white dots. The seeping oil separated animal and paint layers, causing the unrealistic paint to flake off in large pieces.



Photo: Area of paint loss revealing oil-covered skin.

Treatment Solution #2: Collaborative decision with museum staff and community members to remove paint without re-painting. Paint was removed mechanically and using commercial paint remover, then cleared with ethanol and water. Although the specimen does not have characteristic white dots, it looks less manmade and is therefore more understandable to the public.

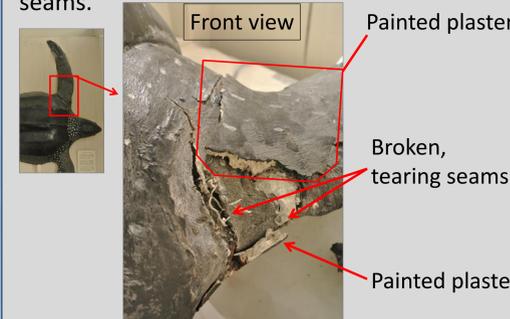


Before



After

Condition Concern #3: Loose front proper left flipper. The taxidermist applied plaster to the base of the flipper that was loose and spalling. Removing failed plaster revealed a large gap in the flesh filled with nails and tearing seams.



Front view

Painted plaster

Broken, tearing seams

Painted plaster



Broken, tearing seams

Plaster removed revealing nail matrix and gap in flipper causing torquing.

Treatment Solution #3: Fill gap and repair tearing seams; add flipper support.



1.

2.

3.

1. Nails trimmed and covered with Japanese tissue using acrylic adhesive Lascaux 498HV. 2. Lightweight spackle applied over tissue to fill gap and broken seams. 3. Tissue applied over fill to provide texture, then in-painted.



Plaster internal support exposed by seam gap allowed for additional support to be added to taxidermist material, not original skin. Epoxy-coated wooden peg inserted into hole in plaster. Painted wooden boards screwed into the wooden pegs to help secure flippers during the move to the new museum space.



(Cowboy hat optional)

What is Cowboy Conservation?

As an emerging conservator on a first solo conservation contract in a remote area of Alaska, I had to adapt to changes in my treatment plan quickly and efficiently. Working on the fly with limited available materials and a short deadline requires the grit of a cowboy conservator.

The following solutions helped keep me on my feet during unexpected hold-ups.

- Limited materials found at the one hardware store in town → Borrowed solvents from a local science research center
- Slower drying times of treatment materials due to humid climate → Increased the air flow in gallery/workspace
- Specimen with 7.5ft flipper span → Organized community volunteers to help move from display to working position
- Turtle will continue to leak oil → Managed expectations by discussing project with community members and museum staff
- No other conservators for hundreds of miles → Discussed tough treatment decisions and worked with Museum Curator



Above: Community volunteers assisting with the move of the turtle. Below: Working with Cordova Museum Curator Denis Keogh on flipper stabilization.



After Treatment

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More information: see the March 2015 SPNHC Newsletter, the *SPNHC Connection*