

AIC Ethics Core Documents Review Task Force Rationale and Subgroups Proposal

Rationale for Revisions

Since the last revision of the American Institute of Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC) Ethics Core Documents (ECDs) in 1994, the conservation field has evolved. As the largest professional organization for conservation professionals in the United States, AIC must remain proactive and reactive to a changing field and changing world. The scopes and definitions of “cultural heritage” and “conservation professional”, as well as the way we practice conservation must be reassessed. After thorough discussion and review, the Task Force finds that revisions to the ECDs, which include the Code of Ethics (CoE) and Guidelines for Practice (GfP), plus Commentaries, is necessary for the following reasons.

- The serious and ongoing damage to our planet’s climate is creating challenges in the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. The ECDs should be revised to reflect the impact of climate change on preservation practice.
- The conservation field has come to recognize that stewardship of cultural heritage resides in communities. We must acknowledge the expertise of historically excluded communities, creators, and originating cultures in the conservation profession and partner with these groups in the work of preservation. The ECDs should reflect that increasing inclusivity is more than an “obligation”; it improves the work we do and makes the field more accessible and relevant.
- Conservation professionals now acknowledge the importance of collaboration both within the field and with stakeholder communities and allied professionals. The ECDs should more extensively address the practice of collaboration and its importance for advocacy outside of the field.
- The ECDs should also encompass how we support our peers and colleagues. Human aspects such as mental health, workplace culture, work-life balance, and equitable compensation affect sustainability of the field and our ethics as conservation professionals, whether one is a permanent employee, contractor, a small business owner, or a student.
- Our field has evolved to prioritize preventive care and its methods as crucial to the health of cultural heritage, yet the current ECDs make little mention of preventive conservation.
- The current ECDs do not offer specific ethics and practice guidelines for heritage scientists in line with those for conservators, despite the importance of these practitioners in the organization and lack of formal codes of ethics in the heritage scientific field.
- The current ECDs focus on practice that involves the preservation of tangible cultural heritage. Our field increasingly recognizes the limitations of this viewpoint, which neglects intangible cultural heritage such as spiritual and ephemeral aspects of heritage, digital, born-digital, stories and sounds, smells, and much more.
- Collections associated with unethical acquisition and/or subject matter are also of concern and should be addressed in the ECDs.

- The Commentaries document is long, difficult to navigate, and detracts from the ECDs; it necessitates re-evaluation. A shorter CoE and GfP would be more practical and effective.
- Recent membership designation work confirmed that members feel, while it is important for peer-reviewed members to adhere to the ECDs, these documents need to be revisited.
- The CoE and GfP should be able to adapt to future changes and growth in our profession and the wider world.

Proposed Subgroups

The following subgroups are proposed in order to ensure a wide range of participation from individual members across the field, and provide a diverse, humanistic approach in the proposed ECDs revision. Cross-over topics between subgroups are purposeful in order to explore how the ethical code applies in different situations, but not to mimic the separation of specialties. We propose to include at least one member of the Task Force in each subgroup. Members of allied fields will be encouraged to participate in the subgroups to ensure diverse viewpoints.

1. Inclusive collaboration
 - Work with allied professionals, including in museums, historical collections, libraries, archives, buildings and sites, academia
 - Work with creators/originators, including individual-artists, architects, and communities
 - Work on unethically acquired collections
 - Work on culturally offensive materials
 - Ensuring equitable acknowledgement of all participants.
2. Investigation and intervention
 - Documentation
 - Treatment options
 - Conservation science/heritage science
 - Sampling
 - Concept of reversibility
 - Cultural significance
3. Environmental sustainability
 - The climate crisis and its impact on cultural heritage
 - Sustainable conservation materials and strategies
4. Professional practice and professional sustainability
 - Private practice and contract workers
 - Mental health, workplace wellness, and treatment of colleagues
 - Health and safety
 - Authorship, acknowledgements, and dissemination
 - Education and training,
 - Professional development and life cycle

- o Professional limitations as an opportunity to collaborate or refer work to colleagues
- 5. Preventive conservation
 - o Emergency preparedness
 - o Risk evaluation
 - o Collection and environmental monitoring
 - o Collection housing for storage and transport
 - o Diverse courier models
- 6. Broadening, reevaluating, and defining the terminology of cultural heritage
 - o Time-based media
 - o Intangible culture
 - o Built heritage
 - o Archaeological heritage
 - o Stakeholders
 - o Cultural heritage
 - o Conservation professionals or practitioners
 - o Archives and libraries
 - o Collection Stewards
 - o Participatory and Post-custodial collecting practices
 - o Professionalism

Respectfully Submitted

AIC Ethics Core Documents Review Task Force
Nylah Byrd, Co-chair
Cynthia Schwarz, Co-chair
Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández
Lynn Bostroff
Tiffani Emig
Kate Fugett
Jennifer McGlinchey Sexton (board liaison)
Kelly McHugh
Ingrid Neuman