



american  
institute for  
conservation

Preserving Cultural  
Heritage

## Rationale for Changes to the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice

The conservation field has evolved since the last revision of the American Institute of Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC) Ethics Core Documents (ECDs) in 1994. As the largest organization for conservation professionals in the United States, AIC must remain proactive and reactive to a changing field and world.

- ❖ The Code of Ethics are not listed in any particular order, and the place of their appearance on the list does not indicate relative importance. While the relative applicability of a particular ethic may vary in any project, conservation practitioners should be familiar with and able to put into practice all of the items on the list.
- ❖ Careful consideration was given to the use of “shall” vs. “should.” The term “shall” conveys a stronger, more binding directive, indicating a mandatory requirement that members must adhere to. In contrast, “should” suggests a recommended action, allowing for professional discretion under specific circumstances. The decision to use “shall” in critical sections underscores the seriousness and non-negotiable nature of core ethical principles, ensuring clarity and uniformity in interpretation. Conversely, the choice of “should” in other contexts of the document recognizes the complexity of conservation practice, where flexibility and professional judgment are essential. This ensures that the document is authoritative and adaptable to the diverse situations conservation professionals face.
- ❖ The Ethics Core Documents have changed as the field has evolved in response to new research, technology, social movements, and worldwide contexts that have impacted the values and priorities brought to this work. This document allows room for continued evolution by providing space for change and a recognition that the Code reflects current practices that may not be relevant in the future. We recognize that we cannot predict how and what will change in the future. Acknowledging that this document must change as our values change over time, we recommend that the Board of Directors consider revisions at least once every ten years.
- ❖ Though previous versions of the Code may have prioritized the care of the cultural heritage object, this updated document represents a shift to a human-centered approach to cultural heritage conservation that is ethically mandated. Cultural heritage is produced by human cultures, relationships, and histories and is constantly evolving. These considerations are the priorities for our work. The shift toward a human-centered approach also supports the inclusion of intangible cultural heritage, such as spiritual and ephemeral aspects of heritage, born-digital material, stories, and sounds.

- ❖ The term “conservation professional” has been changed to “conservation practitioner” to be more inclusive of everyone who practices conservation, even if not a “conservator” in the job title. Given that all members of the AIC must abide by the Code of Ethics and that AIC membership is not restricted to conservators only, the ECDs must use terminology that applies to all AIC membership. Heritage Scientists, Collections Managers, Registrars, Curators, and Archivists are examples of roles that may involve conservation tasks. The AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice should also support these roles in their conservation work. “Conservation practitioner” is also more inclusive, considering interns and other early career practitioners who may not be committed to conservation as their career but should still follow the ECDs in their position.
- ❖ This revision of the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice acknowledges and incorporates collaboration into the working practice of conservation to serve and respond to those who have pertinent knowledge and a stake in the outcome of actions taken by our field. Cultural heritage has value for past and living people, whether artistic, historical, scientific, spiritual, or social, or it may embody other specific, community-defined values. The primary intention of conservation practitioners is respectful and responsive stewardship of cultural heritage. To achieve this goal, collections care practitioners, historic site managers, and other professionals work collaboratively, holding specific responsibilities to the cultural heritage, its creators, and communities. The climate crisis threatens the preservation of heritage worldwide and the stability of governments, economies, and jobs. This document recognizes the impact the climate crisis is having and will have on the preservation of cultural heritage and the field at large. Recommendations are intended to emphasize the severity of the threat while also recognizing the ability to act on those threats varies. Recommendations are not prescriptive, they are intended to be flexible, adaptive, and scalable. This is reflected in the word choices selected for sections touching on environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Embedding it into the Code of Ethics is intended to help support choices that result in a lower climate impact.
- ❖ Humanistic aspects such as mental health, workplace culture, work-life balance, and equitable compensation affect the sustainability of the field and how we work, whether one is an employee, contractor, in private practice, or a student. These aspects deserve focused attention because we are striving towards a sustainable field.
- ❖ Since the previous iteration of the Code of Ethics was written, members of the field have more widely acknowledged and prioritized preventive care as part of the continuum of care. The Code of Ethics values preventive care as an integral part of conservation, thus it has been integrated throughout the document in addition to being addressed as a distinct item. Any change in preventive care specifically highlighted in this version of the Code of Ethics reflects this progress in the field, not as a reduction in its importance.

- ❖ The Task Force spent significant time contemplating the Commentaries, which included a meeting with past drafters of the Code who first established the Commentaries. At the time of their establishment, the Commentaries were intended to be living, evolving discussions that provided flexibility in a changing field. In practice, few additions were made after their initial development, and the Task Force believes adding a third document adds an unnecessarily complicating factor. Instead, The Task Force has integrated key content from the Commentaries into the Guidelines instead of the longer, expository Commentaries. Our main goal of reducing the ECDs from three documents to two is to create shorter, more easily digestible ECDs in hopes they can better serve as reference and resource documents.
- ❖ The Task Force strongly desired to include language in the Code of Ethics advocating for fair pay in the field of Cultural Heritage but was unable to include this wording due to legal reasons. The Task force would still like to assert as much as possible the initial phrasing of Ethic IX: The Conservation Practitioner should strive to foster a culture of fair monetary compensation for all work performed, whether in training or work contexts. We would like to emphasize that pay should reflect the cost of living in the surrounding area, skill, experience, and education of the conservation practitioner, and reflect positive trends in the field at large.

## **Process to Date**

In 2022, the AIC board formed the Ethics Core Documents Review Task Force to review and propose updates to the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice. Nylah Byrd and Cynthia Schwarz co-chair the committee, and members include Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández, Kate Fugett, Jen Kim, Kelly McHugh, and Tiffani Emig. Ingrid Neuman and Lynn Brostoff also served partial terms. In 2023, the Core Group of the Task Force formed and led six subgroups to review the Core Documents with the following focuses: Cultural Heritage Terminology, Environmental Sustainability, Inclusive Collaboration, Investigation and Intervention, Preventive Conservation, and Professional Sustainability and Practice. The Core Group then came back together to reconcile the changes, a draft was sent to the AIC Board of Directors, and the core group incorporated comments from the board.

The updated draft was then shared with leadership from all AIC committees, networks, specialty groups, and the six original task force subgroups. The Core Group received additional feedback from these groups, which was reviewed and incorporated into the final draft.

## **Additional Suggestions**

In publishing the new Code, AIC should consider pointing to existing resources related to various aspects of the Code. For example, it may be helpful to provide links to the 2023 NAGPRA Revisions, SAR Guidelines for Collaboration, and Climate Resilience Resources for Cultural Heritage.

- <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/regulations.htm>
- <https://sarweb.org/blog-guidelines-for-collaboration-museums-and-communities-seeking-equitable-change/>

- <https://sarweb.org/iarc/smnac/>
- <https://www.resilience.culturalheritage.org/>
- <https://stich.culturalheritage.org/>

DRAFT