

CANTERBURY DISASTER SALVAGE TEAM
 "Working Towards Saving Cultural Collections"

NEWSLETTER

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Introduction

This combined edition focuses on relating actual experiences of responding to disasters. Planning and mitigation in response to educated crystal ball gazing can only prepare us so much. Great lessons about what works and what doesn't, what to expect, things to avoid, and so on can all be learned from those who have actually been involved in emergency response.

How prepared can you be? What happens may be very different from what you expect.

Interview by Graham Penwell

Lyndsay Ainsworth, User Services Librarian, and Graham Penwell, Management Services Librarian, are the disaster salvage coordinators at the Lincoln University Library. Recently, Lyndsay attended the American Library Association Conference held in New Orleans from 22 to 28 June 2006. At this conference she attended sessions on what cultural institutions can learn in terms of disaster planning. Lyndsay also spent a day helping clear up some of the damage that had befallen the Louisiana area after Hurricane Katrina.

Was disaster planning a major topic at the conference?

It was more prominent that it would otherwise have been because this was the first large conference to be held in New Orleans in the aftermath of the flooding and destruction in that city from Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. It was a topic of both formal conference sessions and in general conversations with people at breaks. Of course, Librarians are good at post event analysis as the useful information found on a number of post-Katrina Web sites illustrates. One such site is the Hurricane Katrina recovery pages developed by the University of Iowa at <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/preservation/Recovery.html>.

What did you learn that is relevant to our situation from those who had experienced the recent devastation?

The major importance of having an up-to-date and relevant disaster plan can not be over emphasised.

Furthermore, it is vital that the knowledge base in your organisation is more than one deep because in some places, after Katrina, the “expert” was no where to be found. It was interesting that in the American context some institutions have ongoing contracts for service with commercial firms that specialise in disaster recovery and this proved invaluable given the scale of the Katrina disaster.

Based on hearing of people’s experiences, what gaps do you think exist in the New Zealand disaster plans you have seen?

Perhaps we don’t sufficiently emphasis small practical tips in our plans. For example, in large parts of Louisiana there was no electricity for some days so all purchases needed to be made with cash. Many cultural institutions do not store or have access to reasonably large amounts of cash so it was difficult to buy disaster supplies. Another example was that with no electricity cell phone communication soon became impossible as there was no method for charging phones.

Our plans tend to be designed to deal with the recovery of our collections and assume that you will get access to your building fairly quickly and have your disaster team available. What they found in New Orleans was that in a large scale disaster you may not even have access to your neighbourhood for some weeks, let alone your work building. Many of your staff may have been evacuated to another area and be completely out of contact.

In what state were the libraries, art galleries and museums in when you visited 10 months after Hurricane Katrina?

It very much depended on what area of the city they were situated. Wind damage from the hurricane affected all parts of the city including the French Quarter which is the major cultural precinct. Flooding was less widespread but affected many libraries and historic places. Indeed, some institutions may never open to the public again having been forced to close. The struggle to return collections to a state where they are again available for use is exacerbated by lack of staff as some institutions now lack the funding to retain their pre-Hurricane Katrina staffing levels as many of the institutions in the States are privately funded. Also the amount of insurance payouts has in many cases been no where close to the loss and others are still embroiled in legal battles with insurance companies. Other staff have never returned to the city as they have no place to live and other members of their families have no employment in New Orleans but have found jobs in other places. Some institutions are again fully functional such as The National World War II Museum, New Orleans and the Cabildo & Presbytere - Louisiana State Museum both of which I visited.

Tell us a little about the relief work you were involved in?

As part of the conference Libraries Build Communities initiative, volunteers worked to reopen libraries and assist in other ways with the clean-up in the most devastated areas of the city. I was part of team who completely stripped the contents and fittings of a house in Gallier Steet in the 9th Ward. This house had not been touched since 29 August 2005. We were removing the contents of the house which were going to be dumped. It was quite a distressing exercise as items that were not water damaged in the flooding following the hurricane were now completely rotten or mouldy - nothing could be saved.

What is the major change that you think should be done to your own institutions disaster planning in light of what you have seen in New Orleans?

We are thinking of adding a new section to our plan about “calamity planning” where we will focus more on the implications of large scale disaster. This will take the form of broad guidelines for regional disasters. While we think our current plan covers how to manage a disaster just affecting the Lincoln University Library we do feel that there would be a major problem with recovery in a disaster that was on a provincial scale such as a severe earthquake. It is likely that in a major calamity what we have planned for and what actually happens may be quite different due to communication problems, transportation infrastructure damage and resourcing constraints. The New Orleans experience is an example of how these factors can hinder disaster recovery.



Gallier Steet house, 9th Ward New Orleans

CDST Members' - Experiences of Disaster Response

Four members of the team provide their responses to the following questions on individual experiences of disaster response.

What is the current situation at your institution?

Is there a plan?

- 1) No
- 2) Yes
- 3) Yes, for about 7 years, updated each year
- 4) No, there are plans for human safety and business continuance, but not one for the various collections. However, a plan is being written this year for one collection.

Has there been any training?

- 1) No
- 2) No
- 3) Yes, we have had a flood exercise (similar to the CDST workshops) a few years ago and I have done a staff session after each yearly CDST workshop. I and one other staff member have attended various CDST workshops.
- 4) A little, but not much

What sort of network could you call on in the event of an emergency?

- 1) Personal contacts and the CDST members
- 2) Staff, Council resources, CDST members
- 3) Our disaster plan outlines how to contact our own internal team, other University contacts such as Works people and CDST members. We have also had talks with another local University about mutual cooperation in the event of a disaster.
- 4) Mainly staff and possibly colleagues from the nearby University

Would you feel confident that you and the staff could respond effectively in the event of an emergency?

- 1) No
- 2) No
- 3) Confident about responding to a small scale incident like a flood in one part of our building. Not so in relation to a larger disaster involving most of the building or the region as whole. In such an event we may not have the required resources to respond in a timely manner.
- 4) Confident in my abilities based on past experience with responding to emergencies, but not so sure of the abilities of the staff immediately responsible for the collections.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much value do you think the management at your organisation places on emergency response preparations and planning?

- 1) 1 – staff have had fire evacuation training, but my job description includes writing a disaster plan for the collections only.
- 2) 2 – complete reliance on one experienced staff member
- 3) 9 – management have been supportive and have funded equipment and training.
- 4) 5 – Higher on the priority list for some than others.

Why do you think that is?

- 1) Until it happens, it is going to be low on the priority list.
- 2) (no response)
- 3) The immediate manager responsible and the facilities management team understand the value of being prepared and have had experience responding to minor disaster.
- 4) (no response)

What types of emergencies have you been involved in responding to?

- 1) None recently
- 2) Fire and Flood
- 3) None – apart from a burst radiator that only damaged carpet and no other items.
- 4) Fire and flood, though the fire was a small one.

How about smaller/routine problems that come up regularly, but are difficult to solve completely?

- 1) (no response)
- 2) Dripping air conditioning systems and damage through handling of objects by the public
- 3) You just keep working at solving the problems as they arise and monitor the situation. The facilities management team are very supportive
- 4) Oil dripping from joints of recently installed sprinkler systems. Humidity problems during construction when the HVAC system failed, contractors damaging collections in store areas (which led to revisions of contractor access procedures), pest infestations (silverfish, borer, mice, clothes moths). Important that all staff and volunteers know not to ignore what might seem like a trivial matter and that they have 1 or 2 staff members who are identified as the main contact if problems arise. Also important to inspect areas frequently.

In your experience, how did the response efforts differ between the smaller routine problems and the larger emergencies?

- 1) (no response)
- 2) Didn't, response was the same
- 3) Not able to answer as don't have experience with a large emergency.
- 4) Smaller emergencies get slower response, less attention from other staff (i.e. ground/site maintenance), thus have potential to cause more damage. Often, reliance on trained staff more and plan not consulted.

Was a response plan available for any of the emergencies/routine issues that you responded to?

- 1) No
- 2) Yes
- 3) The University has an emergency plan for people safety, a business continuity plan in the event of a disaster, and the Library has a Disaster Salvage Plan
- 4) No, but after the first emergency a plan was started.

If no, were other information documents available, e.g. salvage guides, safety manuals etc.

- 1) Only notes a CDST workshop.
- 4) There was a collection of articles on disaster response, which would have been useless during the response itself, and weren't found until afterwards anyway as only one staff member, not there at the time, knew they existed.

If yes, what was in the plan, were there any supporting documents available, was the plan useful or not?

- 2) The plan served to reinforce procedures.
- 3) As noted earlier, haven't used as never had a large emergency, but improvements were made after using the plan in a mock exercise.

From your experiences, what were the 3 main lessons that you learned that you would take into any future situations, or development of an emergency response plan?

- 1) From a recent emergency at home (see below), a) need to document possession in more detail, e.g. did not have a catalogue of our books, or pictures of art works; b) need supplies of plastic gloves and sponges.
- 2) Be prepared, good housekeeping and training
- 3) (no response)
- 4) Pay attention to how things are going after the first flush of enthusiasm and ensure follow up, watch for people burning themselves out, realise that you won't be able to save everything some make sure to focus energy on high priority/what can be saved as won't have resources to save it all, mitigation efforts (supplies, training etc) are VERY important.

Thinking beyond heritage/archival/art institutions, what other emergencies have you been involved in personally?

- 1) A recent flood at home.
- 2) (no response)
- 3) Have helped out at about three car accidents
- 4) Flood at home from blocked internal gutters on the roof.

Please tell us a bit about what the experience was like and any lessons you would take from that experience into responding to a disaster at your institution.

- 1) On 6-8 August 2006, 120 mms of rain fell in St Martins Christchurch; 70mm in one night. Storm water drains ceased to function and water seeped under our house and into our downstairs, over the concrete foundations and soaking the carpet, which we noticed about 4.30 pm and realised that we had a flood on our hands.

I have not had any flood training, but could draw upon the principles from the recent CDST workshop that I attended, so before any actions were taken a plan of action was agreed upon. I appointed myself the 'co-ordinator' and prioritised tasks for the family (as my membership of the Disaster Salvage Team gave me more knowledge about how to proceed). My partner located the seepage point (cupboard under the stairs), stopped further water coming through and began mopping up what was lying around. I identified the most valuable objects and removed them to higher ground (i.e. upstairs). Top priority was the computer, particularly as the wires were lying on the wet carpet. Next to be taken from the area were the books (approx 1500), and then most of the furniture.

The next morning we rang the insurance company, who arranged for a carpet cleaning firm to come and assess the flood damage to the carpet. Their moisture testing instruments established that the flood had gone further under the carpet than we realised. They confirmed the carpet could be dried out, rather than thrown away and came back with some large blowers, which were left on for 48 hours, directed under the carpet which they had lifted on 3 sides. Windows in the rooms were left open. The carpet staff said that the idea was to keep the humidity low and not raise the temperature too high.

The blowers ran for 5 days, by which stage the carpet was dried out. It was cleaned with an antifungal chemical and deodoriser, and re-affixed, so we could move back in.

The only damage was to one book which sat in the water, but was dried out and successfully flattened once dry.

Our big mistake was to leave our artworks on the wall – they could have been affected by the humidity and rapid changes in temperature. They also could have been knocked off by the carpet cleaners.

2) I have been involved in many retrieval exercises from both fire and flood in other cultural institutions.

The main problem seems to me the institutions feeling of complete helplessness and that actually impedes their disaster salvage procedures. If they had had a plan then by just referring to it, they would have been able to step back and just think about what they are intending to do.

The most immediate urge is to panic and go at the salvage like a bull at a gate, so that is why the importance of a disaster plan is that one sticks to an allotted procedure and this can be so helpful as it makes people take a breath and calm down. It also means you are not rushing around looking for phone numbers of team members and suppliers as you already have them at your finger tips.

3) Not a nice experience. I guess at our institution we will not be dealing with drunk and possibly violent people that is sometimes the case at a car accident.

4) (no response)

Please also give us a few sentences on your own philosophy/approach to emergency response.

1) Think before you act and don't rush into it. Take your time. Make sure your personal safety is not at risk, people are more important than things.

2) Be prepared

3) Don't Panic. Have a good plan that is revised and kept up-to-date, and choose your salvage team carefully. Don't risk personal safety.

4) Have realistic expectations of what you can achieve.

Annual Workshop 2007 – Special Notice

The CDST will not be holding a workshop for 2007. Instead, we will be developing a resource kit for disaster preparedness, planning and response for New Zealand heritage, archival, library and art institutions. Our focus will be on providing a resource for Canterbury and more generally, South Island institutions, but the information will also be applicable to a wider range of New Zealand institutions.

As part of this, we ask that those who have had experience in responding to a disaster answer the questionnaire included in this newsletter (next section). Also, please send us any ideas or wish lists you may have so that we may include them in the development of the resource kit.

Ideas and wish lists can be sent to Lynn Campbell at the Christchurch City Art Gallery. Lynn's contact details are:

The Canterbury Disaster Salvage Team
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PO Box 2626
Christchurch, 8001
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Email: Lynn.Campbell@ccc.govt.nz

Many thanks,

The Canterbury Disaster Salvage Team Members

Questionnaire: Personal Experiences of Disaster Response

In an effort to compile information for the development of a resource kit (see next section) the CDST asks that you take a few moments to fill out the following questionnaire. The results will be used (anonymously) to assist others with planning and responding to emergencies.

What is the current situation at your institution?

Is there a plan?

Has there been any training?

What sort of network could you call on in the event of an emergency?

Would you feel confident that you and the staff could respond effectively in the event of an emergency?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much value do you think the management at your organisation places on emergency response preparations and planning?

Why do you think that is?

What types of emergencies have you been involved in responding to?

Please give details about the emergencies and describe what happened during the response.

How about smaller/routine problems that come up regularly, but are difficult to solve completely?

Please give details about the emergencies and describe what happened during the response.

In your experience, how did the response efforts differ between the smaller routine problems and the larger emergencies?

Was a response plan available for any of the emergencies that you have responded to?

If no, were other information documents available, e.g. salvage guides, safety manuals etc.

If yes, what was in the plan, were there any supporting documents available, was the plan useful or not?

From your experiences, what were the 3 main lessons that you learned that you would take into any future situations, or development of an emergency response plan?

Thinking beyond heritage/archival/art institutions, what other emergencies have you been involved in personally?

Please tell us a bit about what the experience was like and any lessons you would take from that experience into responding to a disaster at your institution.

Please also give us a few sentences on your own philosophy/approach to emergency response.

Anything else you would like to add?

Please email your responses (a word version of the questionnaire has been sent along with the newsletter PDF) to Cynthia Cripps at crippsc@landcareresearch.co.nz, or alternatively post to 44 Ravensdale Rise, Westmorland, Christchurch.

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