

Direct Care of Collections: Ethics, Guidelines and Recommendations

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Discussion Scenario

The Downton Public Museum has collections focusing on regional fine art, material culture, and natural history specimens.

Staff: Director/Curator, Public Programs Manager/Educator (part-time), Maintenance /Groundskeeper (part-time)

Finances: \$ 450,000 annual budget; balanced budget but no capital budget/reserves

Status of Collections Care:

- On site collections storage is crowded and not climate-controlled
- The roof leaks in many places, including over the storage rooms, exhibit areas

Sold: 5 paintings and 12 pieces of furniture (properly deaccessioned), netting about \$750,000. The museum's collections policies say that the museum can use the funds for acquisition and direct care.

The museum wants to use the funds to:

1. Install an independent climate control system in collections storage
2. Pay the director's salary
3. Replace the entire roof



Code of Ethics in Museums: A History

Code of Ethics For Museum Workers, AAM 1925

Provided guidelines for:

- Museum workers interactions with the public, with their director, and other staff
 - A director's interactions with his trustees and his staff
 - The museum's interactions with other museums
1. "Devotion to the cause he serves."
 2. "Faith in the unselfish motivations of his coworkers."
 3. "Honor based on a high sense of justice as the controlling motive of his thoughts and actions."

Direct Care?



Nope...

Collections and Exchanges

“Museums should cooperate by exchange, sale or otherwise so that a very rare object or specimen may be placed where it can best be studied and kept in association with closely related objects. A museum should not “corner the market” by refusing to dispose of duplicate specimens to other museums. It, however, should not release valuable specimens until after they have been studied...”

Code of Ethics for Museums

AAM, 1991... 1993

“Disposal of collections through sale, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum's discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections.”



**What
is
Direct
Care?**

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2015 task force:

- Survey of more than 1,200 museum professionals
- Surprisingly consistent regardless of discipline or position



American
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Direct Care of Collections

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April 2016

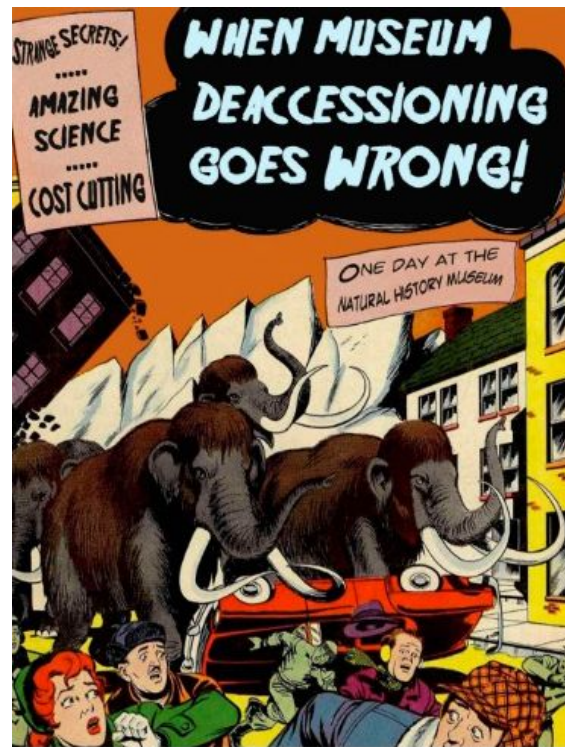


Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning, the process of removing an item from a museum's permanent collections, is an accepted collections management practice when it is carried out in accordance with relevant legal constraints, field-wide standards and ethical principles reflected in each museum's policies and procedures.

Reasons for deaccessioning

- The item is no longer relevant to the mission or collecting goals of the museum.
- The item is a duplicate.
- The museum is unable to care adequately for the item.
- The item cannot be preserved, or has deteriorated and is no longer of any value.
- The item represents an unacceptable hazard to personnel, or to other collections.
- The item may be in violation of applicable laws (stolen) or the item may be subject to other legal claims, including but not limited to repatriation under NAGPRA.



Disposal methods

- Donation or exchange to other non-profit museums or educational institutions.
- Transfer to another collection, typically educational.
- Destruction: If the item cannot be disposed of in any other manner it will be destroyed through physical or mechanical means. This means of disposal must be documented and witnessed.
- Sale: Specimens in the collection may be used to enhance the overall quality of the collection by deaccessioning for sale. Sales should be through public auction and funds used for collections acquisition or direct care of collections.

Direct care is an investment in existing collections that enhances their life, usefulness or quality and thereby ensuring they will continue to benefit the public.



What is Direct Care?!?!

The Matrix:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 The expense is considered direct care of collections. | 2 The expenditure is in a gray area. Consider the ethical principles of direct care and ethics and standards of the museum's discipline. |
| 3 The expenditure is in a gray area. Consider the ethical principles of direct care and ethics and standards of the museum's discipline. | 4 The expense is not an acceptable use of funds. |

Vertical

Strategic investment consistent with responsible fiscal planning and adequate planning for collections; expense not normally considered part of museum's operating budget

Vs.

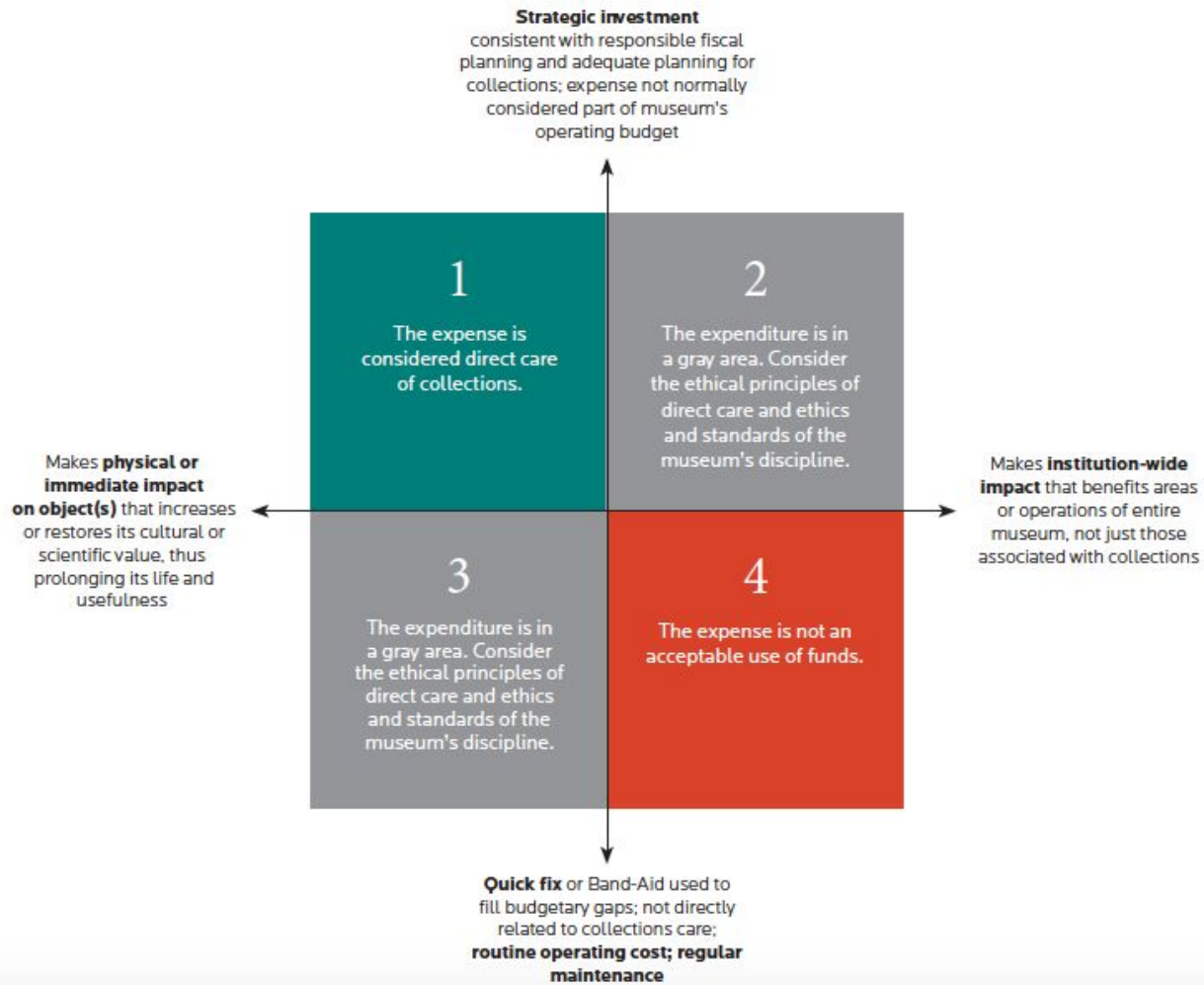
Quick fix or Band-Aid used to fill budgetary gaps; not directly related to collections care; **routine operating cost; regular maintenance**

Horizontal

Makes **physical or immediate impact on object(s)** that increases or restores its cultural or scientific value, thus prolonging its life and usefulness

Vs.

Makes **institution-wide impact** that benefits areas or operations of entire museum, not just those associated with collections



Guiding questions

- Will this investment enhance the life, usefulness or quality of an object(s)?
- Is this a strategic decision based, for example, on an institutional plan, a collections care plan or a conservation assessment?
- Will the expenditure have a physical impact on an item(s) in the collections?
- Will this investment improve the physical condition of an item(s) in the collections rather than benefit the operation of the entire museum?
- Is this decision being made without pressure resulting from financial distress at the museum or parent organization?
- Is this a cost that is not normally considered part of the museum's operating budget?
- Can this decision be clearly explained to the museum's stakeholders and the public?

Institutional variables

- Arboreta and Gardens - progeny
- Art Museums - original owners and trade
- Children's Museums - education vs. permanent
- Natural History Museum - field collections and protected specimens
- Science and Technology Centers - delineation
- Zoos and Aquariums - specialized rules, permanent collection?

Other recommendations

- Policies should designate the procedure for determining use
- Indicate who gets to make the decision
- Further define the scope of direct care
- Set a separate account for funds from sale of collections
- Interest from accounts should be directed to acquisition and direct care

Discussion questions

Table Discussion Two: Your Own Museum

Discuss any or all of following with the colleagues at your table:

1. Think about /share a current or recent direct care/use of funds scenario at your museum
 - a. How can/ could have the white paper help/ed ?
 - b. Would you have made a different decision?
2. Do your institutional core documents—your Collections Management Policy and Code of Ethics—have the specificity needed? How about your accounting practices?
3. How will you use the white paper at your museum? What will you do next?
4. What are your challenges when it comes to defining direct care at your museum?



What was learned from the white paper convenings?



Questions?

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<http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/direct-care-of-collections-ethics-guidelines-and-recommendations-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=8>

Or

Google: AAM Direct Care of Collections

