

Forming A Disaster Recovery Network for Marine Science Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Last year, a paper was presented by Connie Cook outlining the reasons that an institution should have a disaster plan. This year I want to discuss why a group of institutions might want to form a disaster recovery network, and how to go about setting one up, or at least how The Rhode Island Disaster Recovery Plan for Library and Archival Materials came into existence, and how it works. I will, however, remind you of a few points about how disasters usually happen, how they should be handled, and why every institutions should have its own disaster plan.

DISCUSSION

Almost all disasters involve wet books. There are rare instances of damage done to libraries by earthquakes, but even then the most serious problems occur when a pipe bursts from the strain. A fire in a library usually does not cause major salvage problems. The books are either burned and must be discarded, or they are not. The huge damage to libraries and archives suffered because of a fire is caused by the water the fire department uses to extinguish the blaze. Unfortunately, the water damage is seldom confined to the small area where the fire actually occurred. For libraries, archives, museums, and information centers that are located on the coast flooding is a constant danger, and much more common than a fire. All information depositories are liable to pipes or boilers bursting and air conditioning and heating leaks.

Once you have wet books, or wet paper of any sort, the key to minimizing damage is speed. Mold will set in within 24 to 48 hours, even at relatively cool temperatures. Once a book is molded, it cannot be restored to a pre-damage state, and probably will not be worth restoring at all. In contrast, most books that are wet but not moldy if not on coated stock paper will dry out very well, and will need little if any restoration at all.

The best way to assure that books do not mold once they are wet is to freeze them. This not only stops the immediate problem of mold but also seems to give the books some protection against molding as they are thawing out and drying later.

The purpose of a disaster plan for an individual institution is to save time between when a disaster happens and when the books are salvaged. Minor problems can seem very huge when you are standing in the lobby of your building watching water pour onto your collection. A plan in-

cludes mundane facts such as where the main electric switch is located, and who has the authority to sign a requisition for supplies. These facts can save hours of time. An institution's plan will also include what areas of the collection are most valuable, either because of monetary value or because the institution has a unique strength in the area. No one can decide what areas should have high salvage priorities except the people who work in the institution, and even they can seldom do a very good job in the middle of a disaster. The job of the salvage team is to assess the amount of damage and begin salvage operations based on previously set priorities. Again, that has to be done from within the institution where the disaster has taken place.

So there you are, in your institution, with your disaster plan all written. Now I am telling you that you should seriously consider forming a disaster network. Why? For several reasons. Perhaps most basic is human power. In any large disaster outside volunteers are called into pack books, move them, unpack them, etc. If a disaster network has been set up, the volunteers are available quickly, and they will be people who know something about the problems you are facing. There will be less chance that you will be swamped by well meaning but inept help as you may be after a general plea for help.

In addition, every disaster network will include some people who have had a lot of experience handling wet materials. People who have had disasters of their own are almost always more than willing to share their expertise, and can help you avoid some of the less obvious pitfalls into which they fell.

The most important function of a disaster network, though, is the fast access to supplies that a working network has. When I asked dairies, on behalf of Brown University, if we could be allowed to borrow milk cartons in case of a disaster, not one of them would agree. Most said that they were afraid they would need them. When we asked as representatives of the state disaster plan, all but one agreed. The same type of reaction holds true for freezers, unprinted newsprint, refrigerator trucks, and other major equipment that may be needed. If every marine science library and information center in Southern New England asked if they could borrow milk crates in time of trouble, the dairies would be scared to death, envisioning twenty people coming to them at once; and they may likely to turn every one down. A network coordinator can make calls to gather supplies while the people on site begin to set up the salvage operation.

CONCLUSION

Setting up a network does take work. Rhode Island's took two years to complete, mostly because of political reasons. We were starting from scratch, of course; and I think an organization such as this would have many fewer problems. Below I am going to outline the important features of a disaster network:

- 1. The plan should have two or three people writing it, although they may be backed by a committee. We had representatives from all the areas of Rhode Island and all types of institutions we would be serving on a task force. Thus we were able to get input from everywhere, and few ended up feeling that the plan was forced on them. We did have some trouble convincing some people it was for the benefit of their institution rather than our own. Organization like IAMSLIC would probably want to have once overall plan, with regional divisions to coordinate suppliers.
- 2. The plan should include a general guide to writing an institution disaster plan.

- 3. The plan should have a central location that people can call for help, and people there should know to expect calls. We added a form that an untrained person who answers the telephone can follow.
- 4. Copies of the individual disaster plans for each institution should be on file at a central location, preferably the same one that people will call for help. Even the best disaster plan is not useful if no one can find a copy in the emergency.
- 5. Someone should be given the responsibility for contacting suppliers once a year, to make sure that they are still willing to help.

All this may seem like a lot of work, and it is. So far our plan has not been put to an extreme test, although we get calls all the time for help with small disasters. As marine science librarians, you must all be aware that any of you may have a flood at any moment. If a few of you are willing to spend some time coordinating your efforts, damage in even a major disaster can be minimized.