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Rescue remedies for damaged treasures – advice for flood victims

As the many people affected by flood in Queensland come to grips with their devastating loss of property, experts say that it may be possible to salvage some of their family heirlooms and community collections.

That is the advice from the Collections Council of Australia and the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials.

“While many priceless family treasures will be permanently damaged or lost entirely, it is possible some items may be fully or at least partially recovered,” said Tamara Lavrencic, President of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials.

Ms Lavrencic said that through working with communities following floods in Queensland in recent years, conservators have shown that many objects can in fact be salvaged and returned to the family fully or partially restored.

Margaret Birtley, CEO of the Collections Council of Australia, said that it was critical that people did not put themselves at risk in their attempt to find and salvage whatever possessions remain intact.

“There are safe and efficient ways that should be followed by anyone trying to salvage their personal possessions,” she says.

“Conservators working in cultural institutions and in private practice are on standby to offer advice and information on safe handling and salvage of recovered objects – once that time is right,” she stressed.

Advice to people seeking rescue remedies for their flood damaged treasures is available on the websites of both the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials and the Collections Council of Australia.

The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials is the professional organisation for conservators in Australia. Its website is: <http://www.aiccm.org.au>

The Collections Council of Australia is the national peak body representing the shared interests of archives, galleries, libraries and museums. Its website is: <http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au>

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Media inquiries:

Tamara Lavrencic: 02 8239 2360 or 0407 663 419

Margaret Birtley: 08 8207 7272 or 0418 814 957

Salvage procedures

- Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Anyone attempting to salvage their possessions should wear protective clothing - especially gloves, masks and eye protection.
- Risks in flood-affected areas include mould, bacteria, disease pathogens and exposure to waste matter and effluents carried with flood waters.

Salvage

- As a general rule of thumb when preparing to salvage water-damaged material, assess whether you think it will dry in 48 hours - if not, freeze it.
- Some objects should not be frozen, so seek advice from a conservator first.
- Wet objects require support when being handled.
- Plastic racks with mesh type bottoms such as bread trays are ideal for moving and air-drying objects, as they are strong and allow airflow.
- Keep dirty, wet or items separate from cleaner/drier items to prevent contamination.

Priority

When faced with a large collection of water-damaged material, priority should be given to:

1. Objects that are mouldy.
2. Objects that may stick together, such as photographs and books/papers printed on glossy paper.
3. Objects with water-soluble dyes, including artworks on paper, plans, documents, textiles, leather, basketry etc.
4. Lacquered furniture and lacquerware.
5. Electronic media, including audio and video tapes and floppy disks. These need to be treated within 24 hours.
6. Paintings – especially those on bark, masonite and artist board.

Rinsing

In some instances, particularly in the case of flood, items will need to be cleaned before they are dried.

This should only be carried out if you are certain the item is strong enough and it is already wet.