Disaster Recovery and Asbestos Decontamination of Oversize Collections

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History,
Museum Support Center, Collections Support Staff

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The Disaster

In the early hours of the morning of November 23, 1992 a tornado struck the National Museum of Natural History's storage building 26 at the Garber Facility in Suitland Maryland.

Serious structural damage was sustained by the buildings. Numerous collections as well as the area surrounding the building were contaminated by the spread of asbestos from the building's insulation.

Workers covering collections with plastic for temporary protection until a temporary roof is built.

The Response

Immediate Response: November and December 1992

Containment and Safety Precautions

Workers covering collections with plastic for temporary protection until a temporary roof is built.

A wood and plastic super-structure is built around the damaged areas of the building to contain asbestos contamination.

Collection Recovery and Cleanup

Building 26 Recovery: 1994

Collections in Building 26 included:
- Archeology, plaster and stone statues, rocks and minerals
- Paleobiology specimens, skin, bark, and wooden boats.

Smithsonian staff work with asbestos abatement contractors to handle and sort collections for cleaning.

Because many items were fragile Smithsonian staff were always on hand to advise and assist asbestos contractors with the handling of objects.

The Teams

Building 26

Back Row: Leslie Sabo, Kelly Mellon, Deb Chory, Richard Stoyer, Lori Schlenker, Mike Doyle, Cathy Hawkes

Front Row: Criis Geer, Matt Shepherd, Geoff Keel

Building 25

Back Row: Janie Burkett, Lori Schlenker, Charley Potter, Kerry Button, Leslie Sabo

Front Row: Criis Geer, Matt Shepherd, Geoff Keel

Collections in Building 25 included:
- A large number of whale skulls on trailers, whale skeletons, cases of marine mammals specimens, barrels of baleen, crated periodicals and Paleobiology specimens.

During the secondary phases of the recovery and cleanup of the disaster, the specimens were inventoried and reorganized. Anthropology collections were rehoused on aluminum pallets in the Museum Support Center. And a new building 26 with improved facilities was built to house the marine mammal collections.

The Teams


Whale skull and vertebrae stored in Building 25.

Improved storage for marine mammals collections in the new Building 26

Collections on new aluminum pallets in storage in Museum Support Center their new home, Pod 4 of the Smithsonian's.

Unexpected Benefits of the disaster


Collections on new aluminum pallets in storage in Museum Support Center their new home, Pod 4 of the Smithsonian's.

Whale workers and racking sections are cleaned.

Whale bones are sorted onto carts for clearance testing.

Not every item could be successfully cleaned. Some were bagged and labeled for future attention.

For more information, contact:

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