

## Risk Management: Fashion and Uncertainty

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**Abstract:** Preventive conservation is taught as if it were a systematic and scientific subject. This positive view hides the uncertainties involved and neglects the fact that all fields of management are subject to changing fashion. One sign of being up to date with the latest management fashion is fluent use of appropriate vocabularies. But the introduction of a new phrase does not mean a clearer definition of the appropriate way to think and act.

Take 'integrated risk management' as an example. The word 'integrated', used in museum activities, can mean a variety of things. It can mean that all departments within the organisation are aware and involved. It can mean that all stakeholders are consulted, which for museums means considering the expectations and limitations of the visiting public. Integration can mean accepting that risk management is more than a piecemeal tactical approach to individual threats. The word implies that it is necessary to take a strategic view, maximizing the benefits as well as minimizing the downside.

In a specific field such as pest management 'integrated' means following all of the necessary steps: setting action thresholds, monitoring and identification of pests, prevention and control. In risk assessment 'integration' can mean looking at the interactions between hazards, such as synergies between pollutants. Integration recognises that a solution to one problem may increase risk from other hazards.

Lighting in museums and historic houses involves all these meanings of the word 'integrated'. Although it is easy to teach simple conservation guidelines for lighting it is also easy to overlook the uncertainties in the underlying principles. Moreover, even when all the immediate needs of objects, visitors and budget are taken into account, the lifetime of the solution is limited. No matter how good a gallery display looks now, it will go out of fashion.

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## BIO NOTE

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Jonathan Ashley-Smith is an independent teacher, researcher and consultant in the field of cultural heritage risk.

Jonathan studied chemistry to post-doctoral level at the Universities of Bristol and Cambridge. He worked as a metalwork conservator and analytical scientist from 1973-1977 at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) London. Between 1977 and 2002 he was Head of Conservation at the V&A. In 1994 he was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship to study risk methodologies, resulting in the book *Risk Assessment for Object Conservation*, published in 1999. In 2000 he was awarded the Plowden medal for his contribution to the conservation profession. He was Secretary-General of the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) 2003-2006. He was Visiting Professor in the Conservation Department of the Royal College of Art, London from 2000-2010. He supervised research students at a number of UK universities on projects relating to risk, ethics and ethnography. Most recently he was project leader for the damage and risk assessment module of the EC research project "Climate for Culture" looking at risks to collections and interior decoration arising from predicted climate change.

Jonathan's interests are mostly in the area of decision-making in cultural heritage conservation, ranging across conservation ethics, risk-benefit studies, sustainability and the precautionary principle.

