Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC)
Conservation Committee
2014 Food in Institutions Survey Results

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Introduction

Museums, people and food are closely tied together. From staff members' brown bag lunches, to the cafeteria or a catered donor event, food service is a necessity in modern museums and collection holding institutions. At the most basic level, food vendors feed visitors and generate revenue. On the other hand, the presence of food in museums and collection holding institutions presents a challenge to the long-term preservation of museum collections. Incorrect disposal of food waste and insufficient housekeeping both contribute to pest infestation. Food and beverages carried through areas with collections can spill and soil objects, causing damage which may not be reversible.

While balancing the necessity of food service and the needs of the collections is a challenging prospect, documented recommendations in regards to food management within museums are lacking. The Conservation Committee of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) is addressing this dearth of information by creating a Best Practices document for food management in museums and other collection holding institutions. To prepare the document, members of the Conservation Committee reviewed existing resources and, in April 2014, presented an online survey about current practices related to the presence of food in museums and collection holding institutions. 351 people from 21 countries participated in the online survey, which was publicized through 22 museum list servers and social media sites. A few participants also shared their own institutional policies regarding food management.

The results of the survey are summarized below followed by a discussion of common themes identified in the responses. A review of the food management policies shared with the Conservation Committee concludes this report. The information gathered by this survey will guide the creation of a Best Practices document for food management in museums and collection holding institutions. The document will be published through SPNHC and will be reviewed periodically and revised as necessary.

Questionnaire and Results

Background

The sixteen question survey was based on previous work by Catharine Hawks of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. The full set of questions appears below together with summary results. The survey aimed to reach the largest possible variety of collection holding institutions as by asking a range of food-related questions such as "Where is food allowed in your institution?" and "Do the food services affect the collections?" Many of the questions included space to add additional comments for more detailed responses and to accommodate general and open ended questions, such as "What would you change about food services in your institution?" Respondents were asked to share any written guidelines currently in use at their institutions. The survey was approved by all members of the group and uploaded to the free survey service at www.surveygizmo.com.

Recipients

The survey was available online from April 15th-June 1, 2014 and was sent to the following list servers and social media sites:

- Nhcoll-l (List server of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, SPNHC)

- NatSCA (Natural Sciences Collections Association)
- PestList (List server of the Integrated Pest Management Working Group, MuseumPests.net)
- RCAAM (Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums)
- PACCIN (Preparation, Art handling, Collections Care Information Network)
- OSG-l (List server of the Objects Specialty Group, American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, AIC)
- Conservation DistList (Discussion list hosted by the Foundation of the American Institution for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, FAIC)
- UMG (University Museums Group)
- NEMO (Network of European Museum Organizations)
- AASLH (American Association for State and Local History members' blogpost)
- ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation forum)
- Museums Australia Facebook Page
- Museums Association of the Caribbean Facebook Page
- Museum Professionals in Pakistan Facebook Page
- Emerging Conservation Professionals Network Facebook Page
- Conservation Association of Canada Facebook Page
- Pacific Islands Museum Association Facebook Page
- ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Collection holding Property) Facebook Page and "ICCROM Classifieds"
- Association of Museums New Brunswick Facebook Page
- History Council of Western Australia Facebook Page
- Association of Nova Scotia Museums Facebook Page
- AICCM (Australian Institute for the Conservation of Collection holding Materials) Facebook Page and Official Website homepage

Feedback

351 fully completed surveys

103 partially completed surveys

21 countries represented [Australia (4), Brazil (1), Brunei Darussalam (1), Canada (51), Colombia (1), Germany (2), Greece (3), Ireland (1), Italy (1), Netherlands (1), New Zealand (3), Norway (1), Philippines (3), Portugal (1), Puerto Rico (1), Romania (1), South Africa (1), Spain (1), Switzerland (2), United Kingdom (24), United States (236)]
Highest **Percentages by Country**: 69.4% U.S.; 15% Canada; 7.1% U.K.; 1.2% Australia

Respondents were not asked to identify their institutions. Consequently, there may be multiple responses from a single institution. Analysis provided by SurveyGizmo generated location data for 334 of the respondents, from 221 separate cities/towns. Reviewing this data showed that cities with multiple responses generally are large enough to have more than one institution. For example, the top three cities with the largest number of responses are New York City (9), London (8), and Washington, D.C. (8). The incidents of institutional overlap are likely minimal.

Questions and Summary of Responses

This section presents the survey questions and a summary of the responses.

1.   Please tell us where you work:

A majority of respondents work for museums (83.6%), with library/archive second most represented, although at a much lower percentage (13.2%). The 7.5% of respondents who indicated "other" wrote that they work for a university or lab, or combination of museums, libraries, and/or monuments. Less than 4% work in private practice or are unemployed.

2.   Do you have written guidelines or policies regarding food in your institution?

Over half of the respondents do not have written guidelines for food in their institutions (60%). Of the 40% who responded that they do have written guidelines, many confided in the comments section that the documents were not finished, updated, or that the policy is informal. A few respondents shared their written policies. See the Sample Policies Summary section for a discussion of these documents.

3.   What type(s) of food service do you have at your institution? (Check all that apply)

Respondents selected all types of food services available at their institutions; many have more than one type. Special event catering with food prepared off-site is the most common food service at the respondents' institutions (72.7%). 22.7% also have snack bars or coffee carts with food prepared off-site and 42.2% have vending machines with pre-packaged food and beverages. However, many on-site food preparation options are popular; with 47.4% of respondents having special event catering with food prepared on-site and 44.2% having a café or cafeteria with food prepared on-site. In the comments section many pointed out the presence of employee lunches in break rooms or other pre-packaged foods consumed throughout their institutions.

4.   In what areas is food allowed in your institution? (Check all that apply)

Only 4.9% of respondents allow food in galleries on a normal basis, but the number jumps to 48.6% during special events. Some comments state that only drinks are allowed, but the results show that nearly half of all respondents allow food and/or drinks in gallery spaces during special events   Although 54.9% allow food in food service areas only (instead of in galleries and other collection spaces), 2.6% do allow food in collections storage areas and 5.1% allow it in laboratories. Food is allowed in office areas of 74.6% of respondents, and in 47.7% of lobbies. Many respondents' institutions (61.1%) allow food in outdoor gardens or plazas.

5.   Who is responsible for cleaning areas where food is allowed? (Check all that apply)

The responsibility of cleaning areas where food is allowed is mostly shared between custodians (78%) and staff (69.7%). Food service workers are responsible for cleaning at half of the respondents' institutions (51.5%). Visitors and volunteers clean areas where food is allowed at 23.4% and 9.5% of responding institutions, respectively.

6.   Who is responsible for cleaning areas where food is prepared? (Check all that apply)

The responsibility of cleaning areas where food is prepared (when prepared in the institution) is mostly that of food service workers (69.4%), although custodians and staff are also responsible at 48.4% of respondents' institutions. 16.6 % of the respondents report that volunteers help clean food preparation areas.

7.   Does the cleaning of food preparation areas comply with health code regulations?

Half of respondents believe that the food preparation areas comply with health code regulations (51.1%), although 46.8% were unsure if they complied. This indicates a generally high level of confidence in the health code related standards of food services in respondents' institutions. Relatively few respondents (3.1%) felt non-compliance in this area could be an issue. Clearly this would be a matter for referral to appropriate authorities.

8.   What methods are used to ensure that food remains only in allowable areas? (Check all that apply)

The most common measures to keep food in designated areas are general staff intervention (81%) and signs (70.1%), as well as the placement of waste collection containers (52.9%).   The placement of physical barriers between food areas and restricted areas is employed as a strategy by the institutions of 37.4% of respondents. Intervention by the food preparation staff is responsible for keeping food in allowable areas in 17% of responding institutions. Respondents also point out that staff is encouraged and reminded to keep food in designated areas through e-mail and verbal reminders. For example, one university institution e-mails guidelines at the beginning of each term to remind all staff members, students and volunteers.

9.   Do these methods work?

41.8% of the respondents believe that the methods to restrict food to allowable spaces are successful, while 3.7% of respondents do not feel that the methods used to restrict food to allowable areas work. A majority of respondents (55.9%) believe the methods work "sometimes."

10.   How is food waste handled? (Check all that apply)

Food waste is handled in a variety of ways in the responding institutions. There is specific food service staff to dispose of waste from visitors and staff in 34.9% of respondents' institutions. Waste is discarded in a central waste collection area (i.e. trash room, loading dock, etc.) in the places of work of 46% of respondents. Visitors and staff are responsible for discarding waste in food service areas for 80.6% of respondents. In office areas, 58.6% responded that waste is discarded and removed daily, but 22.9% report that it is discarded less frequently or only when deemed necessary. In laboratories 7.4% discard waste that is removed regularly, although 1.7% discard food in labs that is collected less frequently. In collections storage, food waste is discarded and removed regularly in 4% of responding institutions, while 1.1% has food waste that is emptied less frequently. Several comments (11 in total) mention that waste is disposed of by special event staff, or special efforts are made by museum staff to clean directly after events.

11.   Have collections been affected directly by food or beverages?

A majority of respondents did not experience their collections being affected directly by food or beverages (81.1%), although 16.9% have seen the effects of food on collections during events or due to the locations where food is allowed. Examples of these: drink spills onto collections or pedestals in galleries, pest infestations like cockroaches, mice and fruit flies, condiments and other food splashing onto objects. Noteworthy: Many respondents describe the spills as infrequent; only one says that they happen regularly.

12.   Have you experienced instances of pest infestation related to the presence of food in your institution?

A slight majority of respondents have not experienced instances of pest infestation related to the presence of food (56.9%), although 40.2% have experienced infestations. The types of infestations noted in the comments include: ants, cockroaches, fruit flies, and mice. A few noted that there was an increase in pest activity, such as cockroaches, for the few days following a special food event.

13.   Do the food services in your institution affect the quality of collections care?

A high percentage of respondents (74.9%) do not believe that the food services are affecting the quality of collection care, although 19.7% do believe it. In the comments section, many people revealed that they are unsure whether or not the food is affecting the quality, but they do know that time is being taken away from other collections care needs to be more vigilant about integrated pest management (IPM) in galleries, or cleaning up after events.

14.   Have the costs and benefits of food service in your institution been evaluated?

Although most of the respondents have food in their institutions, only 18.9% have evaluated the costs and benefits of food service. Many responded that they did not know whether the costs and benefits had been evaluated, or if they had, they had not been shared with the collections/conservation departments. Those who were told of the results revealed that the food services (especially restaurants and catered events, such as fund raising events) were profitable and thought to be important to the institution. One respondent commented that food service "is a major revenue generator in that the restaurant operator pays substantial rent, and function booking is fairly lucrative. These revenues are considered essential for hiring extra staff and supporting programming, as line budget covers only facilities costs and salaries."

15.   Please tell us one thing you would change regarding the food service in your institution: (See the Main Issues section for results)

16.   Please share any additional comments: (See the Main Issues section for results)

Main Issues

The final two survey questions asked respondents to add additional comments. Not all respondents gave answers to these requests. Once collected, these formed a list of recurring issues with the management of food in institutions. We have listed these in order of how many respondents raised the issue, from most frequent to least frequent.

Lack of official food policy

A significant absence of official policy within institutions was easily identified as the biggest issue by 60 respondents. They also mentioned that a lack of professional external guidelines means that institutions will not necessarily consider it a priority, and therefore are reluctant to spend time creating a new policy to address the issue.

Staff issues

The biggest issue experienced by 39 respondents was the lack of any break/lunch room to store or consume food. This frequently results in eating and storing food at desks and in collections areas. This is a risk not only to the collections but also to staff, who may not be abiding by institutional health and safety regulations. Respondents also mentioned a lack of staff training has resulted in little knowledge of preventive conservation measures such as IPM.

Location of vendor food

In 20 of the responses, respondents mentioned that often vendor food is not provided in a purpose-built space but simply 'crammed' into existing exhibition or public areas. This could be in the form of a hotdog vendor or small coffee stand. Serving food in this way not only increases many risks to collections but also demonstrates to the visitor a lack of care and respect for collections.

Special events

Special events have become a standard method of institutional fundraising and publicity. However, if not managed correctly, they can create problems. Of the respondents, 16 identified special events as the most important issue. Respondents mentioned that in many cases, special events are not isolated to specific spaces resulting in food being 'carried' to other areas, which may not be maintained to a suitable level, especially in regards to housekeeping. It was also mentioned that special events are often hosted in the more glamorous areas of an institution, which may in fact be least suitable for this purpose. Issues may relate to the construction of the space; it may be carpeted or be poorly sealed. The location of the space may also be furthest from the kitchen or waste disposal, resulting in food and garbage being transported through collections space, potentially by external contractors.

Signage for visitors

Lack of or poor signage for visitors was a concern for 12 respondents. Ineffective signage fails to address why restrictions such as 'no eating' are in place. By educating the visitors into the reasons why these restrictions are place, it's more likely that they will understand and comply. Using signage to bear the brunt of this communication task frees docents, security staff and others to engage in more friendly and less 'policing' interactions with visitors.

Design of food

The way food is presented concerned 5 respondents the most. They took into consideration the choices and preparations of the foods available within institutions and whether it could be easier to produce and simplified, i.e. not involve multiple elements, long and intense preparation or even the need to be cooked.

Design of kitchens

For 2 respondents, concerns about sanitation, extraction and general cleanliness of either staff kitchens or those used by external contractors was the biggest issue identified. Respondents were unsure who was responsible for maintenance of kitchens and whether they are kept to professional standards.

Sample Policies Summary

Respondents were asked to share their written guidelines or policies regarding food management in their institutions. Eleven respondents shared twelve policy and guideline documents. Of the twelve documents, six were solely concerned with food management in the institutions, and the remaining seven documents included food guidelines within larger documents such as IPM policies or guidelines for special events.

Some common themes found in all of the documents are restrictions on food and beverages in areas containing collections, the necessity of good housekeeping and control of food and beverages during catered special events.

Food restricted from collections areas

All of the documents restrict food in collections storage areas. One institution allows museum employees to consume food in collection handling areas if all collection items are removed prior to the event and the area is thoroughly cleaned after. Another institution restricts food to staff break/lunch rooms, with an exception for the director's office. Food storage for employees' personal use, when noted, is required to be in centralized locations such as break/lunch rooms and/or in sealed, hard sided containers.

Importance of good housekeeping

The documents all stress the importance of good housekeeping. Areas where food is prepared, stored and consumed all require regular cleaning. The importance of prompt waste disposal is described in eleven documents.

Food at special events

Seven of the documents detailed procedures and guidelines for food and beverages at catered special events. These documents specify where food is allowed to be prepared, served and consumed. None of the institutions allow food into galleries with collections during events. Restrictions on cooking and open flames are common themes, as are restrictions on beverages that may stain, such as red wine, and on food that is messy, such as popcorn. Three of these documents require museum staff to review food policies with catering vendors prior to events.

None of the documents detail procedures for working with regular, in-house food service vendors.

Special thanks to the following institutions for sharing their policies with this project:
Andy Warhol Museum
Banff Park Museum National Historic Site
Canadian Museum of History
Duke University Libraries
Glasgow Museums Resource Center
Grant Museum of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, University College London
Library and Archives Canada
Minnesota Historical Society
Taft Museum of Art
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Whitworth Art Gallery

Conclusion

During the course of this survey, it has been revealed that many consider food in institutions a necessary evil-- a practice that benefits profit margins and visitor/staff morale, while also potentially increasing risks to collections. With over 70% of 351 respondents having food in their institutions for special events and almost all having food on a daily basis for visitors and/or staff, this is a reality that collection care professionals face. Further, 40% of respondents noted pest infestation due to the presence of food and 17% of survey respondents have had incidents where food affected collections.

While 40% of respondents reported having written guidelines regarding food management, a portion of these are word-of-mouth or in-progress as indicated by the additional comments. Of the twelve complete policies submitted, all contained similar guidelines. Respondents who kindly added notes at the end of the survey revealed some specific issues. These range from the need for improved public signage and difficulties dealing with vendors, to the most common concern of a lack of official policy in institutions regarding the management of food. Some also revealed that even without incidents, they feel that too much time is devoted to cleaning and preventing damage, taking time away from other important duties. This survey therefore reinforces the need for a Best Practices document. By providing a benchmark on this issue, collections staff will be better equipped to develop and improve their own institutional policy on the management of food.

Respectfully submitted,

Rebecca Newberry, Bethany Palumbo and Fran Ritchie

Appendix A: Complete Food in Institutions Survey

1. Please tell us where you work:
   a. Museum
   b. Library/Archive
   c. Freelance/Private Practice
   d. I am currently not working
   e. Other
2. Do you have written guidelines or policies regarding food in your institution?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. If yes, would you please share them with us by e-mailing the Conservation Committee Co-Chairs (e-mails listed at the end of the survey). All contributions would be acknowledged.
3. What type(s) of food service do you have at your institution? (Check all that apply)
   a. Snack bar or coffee cart with prepackaged food (prepared off site)
   b. Café or Cafeteria with food prepared on site
   c. Vending machines
   d. Special event catering, all food prepared off site
   e. Special event catering, food prepared on site
   f. Other, please explain:
4. In what areas is food allowed in your institution? (Check all that apply)
   a. Food service areas (cafes, etc.) only
   b. Galleries
   c. Galleries only during special events
   d. Office areas
   e. Lobby
   f. Laboratories
   g. Collections storage areas
   h. Outdoor gardens or plazas
   i. Other, please explain:
5. Who is responsible for cleaning areas where food is allowed? (Check all that apply)
   a. Custodians
   b. Food service workers
   c. Staff
   d. Volunteers
   e. Visitors
6. Who is responsible for cleaning areas where food is prepared? (Check all that apply)
   a. Custodians
   b. Food service workers
   c. Staff
   d. Volunteers
7. Does the cleaning of food preparation areas comply with health code regulations?
   a. Yes

      b. No

      c. Not sure

8. What methods are used to ensure that food remains only in allowable areas? (Check all that apply)

      a. Signs

      b. Physical barriers between food areas and restricted areas (i.e., doors, half walls, etc.)

      c. Intervention by food service staff

      d. Intervention by other staff

      e. Placement of waste collection containers

      f. Other, please explain:

9. Do these methods work?

      a. Yes

      b. No

      c. Sometimes

10. How is food waste handled? (Check all that apply)

      a. Discarded by visitors and staff in food service areas

      b. Collected by food service staff from visitors and staff

      c. Discarded by food service staff in a central waste collection area (i.e. trash room, loading dock, etc.)

      d. Discarded in office areas and removed daily

      e. Discarded in office areas and removed less frequently or only when deemed necessary (i.e. when it starts to smell!)

      f. Discarded in laboratories and collected regularly

      g. Discarded in laboratories and collected less frequently

      h. Discarded in collections storage areas and collected regularly

      i. Discarded in collections storage areas and collected less frequently

      j. Other, please explain:

11. Have collections been affected directly by food or beverages?

      a. Yes

      b. No

      c. If yes, please explain:

12. Have you experienced instances of pest infestation related to the presence of food in your institution?

      a. Yes

      b. No

      c. If yes, please explain:

13. Do the food services in your institution affect the quality of collections care?

      a. Yes

      b. No

      c. If yes, please explain:

14. Have the costs and benefits of food service in your institution been evaluated?

      a. Yes

      b. No

      c. If yes, please explain:

15. Please tell us one thing you would change regarding the food service in your institution:
16. Please share any additional comments: