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CONSTRAIN: An insecticide developed for museum use.

Most insecticides have been developed for agricultural, commercial or industrial use. That is, they are designed to be powerful and efficient insect killers on materials that have specific functions (such as foodstuffs) and usually short-term life. Although all insecticides are registered under the Pesticides Regulations Act 1986 and have to conform to standards of safety, the formulations incorporating the insecticide are developed to satisfy the usual commercial demands. As a result, many of the products currently on the market are not suitable for treating museum collections, where long-term safety to human health and the well being of the object is essential.

CONSTRAIN was developed to produce an insecticide of proven efficacy, that was environmentally sound and also satisfied current conservation criteria.

The product

The insecticide permethrin is sparingly soluble in water and so other formulations use water dispersible powders, oil/water emulsions or organic solvents such as white spirit. CONSTRAIN is a micro-emulsion, that is, a clean thermodynamically stable dispersion of permethrin in a neutral surfactant which does not have an oily or high solvent content. It has rapid penetration into a variety of substrates including timber and being

water-clear does not stain or leave a visible residue. On exposed surfaces it is totally biodegradable but when absorbed into materials will give extended protection.

CONSTRAIN was tested for its insecticidal efficacy by the Central Science Laboratory, Slough, and found to perform as a residual insecticide, as well as or better than comparative products. It is cleared for all museum pests, including wood borers, textile pests, silverfish, book lice etc., and as it is cleared for amateur use non-professionals can happily use it - following the instructions on the label.

In order to test its conservation worthiness, CONSTRAIN was tested by the Oddy test for any enhanced attack of metals (steel, lead, copper, tin, silver) and showed no effect. It was also applied to a wide range of textiles variously dyed to check for any staining or colour change, and also on a range of papers and cards. Again, there was no visible deleterious change.

CONSTRAIN was developed to provide a safe effective insecticide that can be used directly or indirectly on a wide range of museum materials and collections. Although it would be naive to expect it to be suitable in all circumstances where a residual insecticide is needed, it does meet most conservation criteria and is a useful addition to the armoury.

CONSTRAIN is available in 500ml trigger packs at £5.00 (+VAT) inc. p+p from Historyonics, 17 Talbot Street,

Cardiff, CF1 9BL [Tel. 01222-398943.
Fax. 01222-235193]

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What Use are Collection Surveys?

Most people working in museums particularly those responsible for collections management are familiar with the concept of collection condition surveys. The use of statistical methods to sample survey collections may have made the process manageable but it is still an enormous commitment. The purpose of the paper is to examine if these surveys are being used in the most effective and efficient way.

The real starting point for the popularity of condition surveys was 1988 when the National Audit Office published "*Management of the collections of the English National Museums & Galleries*".

In 1991 UKIC organised a conference on storage at which Suzanne Keene presented a very influential paper (well worth reading) on Audits of Care. This described a method of carrying out a sample survey of collection condition using a simple questionnaire and scoring system. In order to be clear about what was involved in the survey and to differentiate the technique from condition reports the methodology was defined - "*collection condition surveys are surveys undertaken in order to*

assess, or audit the condition of collections as a whole, rather than to identify objects requiring action" (Keene 1991)

Unfortunately the definition has not stuck precisely and this has led to a plethora of surveys being carried out using the Keene method but with varying aims. Any review of papers on the subject will confirm this diversity; it is easy to draw a list of nearly 20 different reported motivations for surveying. (Taylor, pers. comm) This suggests that the condition survey method is being applied to gather information on a much wider remit than it was originally designed for.

In researching the presentation I read 12 published articles on surveying. I found that they fell naturally into three groups. The first could be described as classical Keene type surveys although often these were individually amended by the institution. The second type I shall describe as audit of the state of conservation and collection condition and were normally conducted over several institutions. The third type I describe as simple snapshots. I chose to look at them all together as the survey methodologies overlap.

Looking at each in turn I looked at the stated aims, the results quoted and finally whether I thought it might have been possible to achieve the results in a simpler way.

The first type (Keene model) listed aims including:

- identify storage improvements
- identify environmental improvements

- monitor deterioration
- plan future research
- evaluate success of past treatments
- "to do a survey"

The second group, conservation audits listed aims including;

- framework for strategy for improvement
- quantify conservation needs
- identify priorities set work programme
- seek resources
- identify storage problems
- identify environmental improvements
- measure damage to collections
- predict possible damage
- status of collections

The third type, simple survey listed aims including;

- identify cause of damage
- identify programme for conservation
- identify environmental improvement
- priorities
- identify storage improvement priorities

Clearly the aims overlap between survey types. Furthermore all the published work reported similar results, that the surveys led to clearer defined priorities or a shift of attention towards collection condition inside the surveying institution. The more significant difference between survey methods was the amount of time and money that was taken up to achieve results. Not every publication contains details of how long the data took to gather and it seems that this factor was not always being carefully analysed although comparisons can be drawn. For example in Johnsen (1994), a simple survey shows the results of surveying 3050 artefacts on a single

sheet whereas some of the Keene based surveys asked at least 12 questions per artefact with further written comments. Yet both types are reported as achieving similar results. Although some of this difference may be justified in terms of different types of artefact is the method used being questioned enough?

In two of the published reports the authors raised the issue of how much data was being gathered, both had started with a "standard" model but found that they did not get the information that they wanted for the purposes of their study.

"The Survey amassed a large amount of data, most of which has been ignored subsequently as it is considered to be of no relevance either to the aims of the survey or in the context of the collection". (Dollery 1994)

"At first it was intended that the survey should take the form of a comparatively straight forward examination....to get... priorities for conservation. The first survey had three questions....this format was used once and found to be far too basic and inconvenient to use" (Walker 1987)

In both these cases the method was questioned in the light of the defined aims and indeed Keene recommends trial surveys at the outset which should help identify just these sorts of issues. What is more alarming is when there seems to be less evidence of critical thinking about what data is being gathered and why. One article describes circumstances in which a

collection was decaying, then describes the survey before concluding with recommendations to resolve all the problems that they had outlined a years work earlier.

Conclusions

Collection surveys are a popular tool and have clearly helped raise the profile of conservation and collections care. They are also often an enormous commitment in terms of staff time. If you plan to conduct a survey, identify and define the aims tightly. Use these aims to question your chosen survey method and check its appropriateness. Ask yourself questions about your survey

Is it to find out about your collection or to get funds. Be honest, why gather in depth details of damage, disfigurement, etc. etc. If the whole thing will be reduced to one side of text and two pie charts.

Ask also who the survey is for. Is it for the surveyor or the surveyed? This is especially important if the surveyor or the instigator of the survey is from another organisation. You may contribute a lot of resources to a survey so have you contributed to the definition of its aims?

Ask will the benefits be direct, will you get a check-list of things to do, or indirect, a politician or senior manager will see things differently and change policy as a result.

Exclude all irrelevant questions and avoid the urge to say "while we are surveying we could also ask this other

question it may come in handy".

Look at how many questions are being asked against how many will be analysed. Don't forget that you should allow a lot of time for this element of the project.

Finally, when you look back on the exercise identify the results of the survey and question if the results were achieved in the most effective way.

Above all don't aim to do a collection survey just because everyone else has.

References

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