Health and Safety

A New Year

Perhaps not since the Florence floods of 1956 has the conservation profession faced challenges of the magnitude we faced last year. Closest to home was the devastation from hurricane Katrina (and little sister Rita). Of even wider scale disruption were the Southern Asian tsunami (technically late 2004) and the earthquake in Pakistan.

2005 should mark a new day for conservation preparedness in the US and worldwide. As a profession, we now know the magnitude of what we need to be preparing for. We know that people come first, before art and material culture. We know we may not be able to rely on infrastructure. And, we know that there are much worse things than the loss of cultural heritage.

I was lucky enough to have been chosen to be on the first HEART (History Emergency Assistance Recovery Team) team into Louisiana. The project was organized and funded by AASLH (American Association for State and Local History) with the conservation team assembled by AIC. (Headed by none other than WAAC's outgoing, outgoing President, Bev Perkins, the response coordinator for AIC's Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Committee.)

On the conservation side, we were a dream-team - capable of handling almost any conservation obstacle thrown at us. David Goist, had previous experience with FEMA, with hurricane recovery, and was the leader of the conservation community's Katrina response from day -3 (before the hurricane made landfall). Sharon Bennett trains the trainers to train the trainers. An archivist, she has worked more with wet recovery than anyone I've met. Both are on the AIC Emergency … Committee. Not surprisingly, I was the Health and Safety person on the team.

When we arrived in Baton Rouge, we began learning from the experience almost immediately. Unfortunately, what we first learned is that it is possible to be too early. On day 22 post-landfall, many sites were still not accessible, and New Orleans was still closed, requiring a police escort to pass the checkpoints. This led to frustration and wasted time on our part, compounded by Hurricane Rita's approached and our transformation from responders to refugees. The too meager upside is that we were able to help some people, and many lessons were learned, some of which I'll try to pass on to you in this column.

I had brought lots of supplies, pretty much following my own recommendations from this column in September. The item I did not think to bring, although it was on a number of other lists of emergency response supplies, was a photographer's vest with lots of pockets. (And that's how I lost my little head-worn flashlight and a pair of leather gloves. I was carrying too many things and lost track of a few.)

One thing I learned was how very important it is to have well-understood rules for entering a disaster site. Before entering a site, everyone involved must plan for a few emergency contingencies. Everyone needs to know who is leading the team into the site. It might be a conservator, a staff member from the facility involved, or a security officer. This sounds like common sense, or even basic Boy Scout camping rules, but it does not come naturally or easily. Team members must resist the urge to wander off. While the physical dangers to life and limb should be fairly low by the time conservators are wandering around, there still could be some unexpected dangers present. Also, the collections are, one hopes, under some form of security. If you leave the group, you might get locked out and be physically unable to return to your colleagues.

Before entering the site, everyone should agree on a location to meet if the group becomes separated or if something bad should happen. (The vehicle in which you arrived is an obvious choice.) If someone needs to leave the group, the leader must be informed. If possible, the group should wait in the same location for the individual to return or accompany the person out. If that is not possible, either don't leave or a clear means of rejoining the group must be worked out.

Another problem was technological. We had lots of gadgets: digital cameras, video cameras, laptops, cell phones, Palm Pilots, and other items with rechargeable batteries. Unless you are prepared to work without any of these tools and you brought lots of film and/or batteries, you need to prepare for feeding your brood of high-tech gadgets.

As the technological junkie on our team, I had prepared for keeping all my little charges charged. I knew we would be traveling from site to site in a van. So I brought enough equipment to charge everything all at the same time from a cigarette lighter receptacle (also called an accessory outlet) in a car or van.

First was an adapter to split the single accessory outlet into three. Then I connected a DC to AC power inverter to one of the outlets. I connected a multi-plug cube into the AC output of the inverter. (All these high tech appliances take very little current, so a reasonable inverter can power lots of chargers at once.) Then we could plug in laptops, cell phone chargers, and battery chargers for the digital cameras and video recorders. (You will notice in the rat's nest of wires in the photo, a Palm Pilot, two cell phones, a battery charger for the video camera, and wires trailing off to a laptop.)

Chris Stavroudis, column editor

Depending on how much driving you do versus how many rechargeable devices you need to do the job, you might need a fast recharging battery pack to drive the slower recharging devices. A computer UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) should do the trick. If you leave your devices charging when the vehicle is not running (and the vehicle does not switch-off the power to the cigarette lighter when it is turned off), you might want to get a device that turns off the power when the vehicle battery is partially drained to prevent running the battery down to the point of not being able to start the car.

There are better DC to AC inverters and worse DC to AC inverters (the device to convert 12 volt DC in the car to 110 volt AC). I've had no problems with the one I use on field surveys to power my laptop (a Linksys Power2Go) and have had no problems with a similar looking device from Coleman. However, a unit I purchased on the road (a Cobra CPI 400) never worked and had an absurdly restrictive warrantee; I just took a loss on it after two calls to get it repaired. I've heard similar stories about other brands of inverters. So, if you buy one, test it out in realistic conditions before needing to rely on it in the field.

If there is power at the site you are working on, you should have a portable GFI to connect between your equipment and the outlet. A GFI (Ground Fault Interrupt) device minimizes electrocution hazards. If power is not reliable, at the very least a surge protector would be a prudent way to keep your goodies from getting fried by a power irregularity. Better would be an aforementioned UPS. Again, for the multitude of low current appliances we use, a low wattage device would be all that is needed.

Having a video camera on hand is a very handy way to capture lots of information – both images and running descriptions by the team. It is also indispensable for updating filed notes after the survey. However, in an emergency, you must have a camera that can function under extremely low light levels. A number of digital video cameras have an IR mode that can record black and white footage in near or even total darkness. The lack of this feature on one of our camcorders rendered it nearly unusable at one site.

We ended up using paper forms for surveys. (I hope to have a better technological solution for the next disaster.) However, had we used a computer for surveys, a sound and redundant backup strategy would have been absolutely necessary. (Amongst my supplies, I brought a USB/FireWire external hard drive and a stack of CD-Rs.) We did find a couple of USB key-chain drives (also called jump drives, thumb drives, or flash drives) were very useful.

We were lucky to have a well-outfitted RV as a base camp. This allowed us to watch TV and see the reports of Hurricane Rita initially heading for one teammember's home and then veering and further demoralizing Southern Louisiana. Had we not had a television (and generator to power it), we could have been in a very serious predicament.

Every team responding to a natural disaster should have something like the etón FR-300 AM/FM/TV1/TV2/Weather Receiver. It is all that, and it has a hand-crank to charge a built-in rechargeable battery. It can be set to monitor the US weather radio broadcasts for weather alerts. In addition, it has adapters that allow you to power/recharge your cell phone. (It also has a built-in flash light, flashing red light, and siren, all of which can be powered by the hand crank.)

When responding to a disaster, please remember that the people who weathered the storm, survived the earthquake, or were delivered from deluge are people. They have lives, family, pets. They have complex emotions to work through that you as a responder cannot imagine. The last thing we, who are not saving lives, want to do is make things harder on these people. I can imagine nothing so cruel as asking a museum professional to choose between checking on their family or property or checking on their museum.

Chris Stavroudis is a conservator in private practice.