

*Important lessons learnt by Julie McCarthy, a conservation professional, while working on the ground recovering cultural material following the catastrophic Lismore Flood in 2022.*

When entering a disaster zone, it is vitally important to remember that people are shocked, grief-stricken, stressed, and exhausted. Take the time to listen and understand the emotional and physical capacity of those onsite, and work within that capacity.

The conditions on site will inevitably be imperfect. Try to be patient and non-judgemental. Everyone who turns up is doing their best.

Local knowledge is invaluable. Many on the ground, including volunteers and staff, will have a thorough understanding of the collection and may have experience from prior disasters.

Establish quickly where the institution needs you in the chain of command. Who is in charge on the ground?

Create a list of recovery actions that can be crossed off as completed and assign names. Some jobs will require specific skills, anyone can do others. If people are looking for something to help with, they can see which tasks have or have not been allocated. This will eliminate people asking, "what can I do now?".

Instructions need to be clear. Avoid the WHY, just WHAT and HOW. People will not take in the WHY in a disaster scenario, it is too overwhelming. They just need to know that they wrap these in that, put them there, and label them with this. Anything else is noise. This is equally true if you are providing written instructions.

Give regular group updates and ensure people take time out.

Avoid having too many people involved in specific aspects of the recovery. It is vital to be able to control the process, particularly in terms of security.

Flexibility is key. Things won't necessarily go to plan with transportation or supplies. Creative problem solving is important.

Be self-sufficient and don't expect to be provided with food or essentials. Bring your own water, bedding, detergent and sanitation supplies. Ensure your food doesn't require local resources to cook. If you are driving, fill up with fuel outside of the disaster zone so as not to use local fuel supplies. Everyday items will be scarce, so avoid adding to an already stretched supply chain

This resource was adapted from a presentation by Julie McCarthy of Papers Past at the AICCM 2023 Disaster Preparedness Calendar Launch.