

Getting Ready in Indian Country: Emergency Preparedness and Response for Native American Cultural Resources

A National Overview

The Seminole Tribe of Florida's Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum lives with the threat of hurricanes, wildfires, and mold. After Hurricane Wilma damaged the museum's roof in 2005, the staff realized that a functional emergency plan was needed. The museum is now part of a tribal-wide plan that includes annual updates, Incident Command System training, and regular drills. Museum Director Anne McCudden says proudly, "because of this work, we know we can safely evacuate our collections to a secure vault in 24 hours."

Introduction

The Heritage Health Index, a national study of the state of America's collections released at the end of 2005, found that 80 percent of archives, museums, historical societies, and libraries were ill-prepared for emergencies. That same year, Hurricanes Katrina, Wilma, and Rita reinforced the lesson that in any disaster, even the simplest steps to prepare can help protect precious cultural and historic resources from damage or outright destruction.

In recent years, emergency preparedness has become an increasingly important focus for historic sites and cultural institutions alike. The number of information resources, planning tools, and model practices has grown. In many communities, a new dialog has blossomed between the stewards of cultural heritage and local emergency management and response agencies. However, some tribal cultural organizations and heritage caretakers still lack access to the resources and relationships that would help them become well prepared for any emergency.

Getting Ready in Indian Country is an invitation to consider emergency preparedness specifically for Native American interests. It has three parts: (1) this brief report exploring the issues and making recommendations; (2) an "Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage"; and (3) Preparedness Discussion Questions designed to be shared within and among tribal nations. Taken as a whole, the report and accompanying tools are intended to advance emergency preparedness, stimulate discussion, and inspire new initiatives in Indian Country.

The primary audience for *Getting Ready in Indian Country* is first and foremost Native Americans who are the stewards of their peoples' heritage. It should also be useful to the non-native cultural community, public safety officials, and agencies that provide services and funding for tribes. They are essential partners in the preservation and protection of tribal heritage.

Background

Getting Ready in Indian Country is a project of Heritage Preservation funded by a grant from the National Park Service with support from the Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance, United States Department of the Interior. Heritage Preservation is a national nonprofit organization in Washington, DC, dedicated to preserving cultural heritage for future generations through leadership, education, and innovative programs. It has more than 15 years' experience assisting museums, libraries, archives, and historic sites prepare for and respond to emergencies.

In recognition of the profound impact disasters can have on cultural institutions and the collections they hold, Heritage Preservation joined with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to create the Heritage Emergency National Task Force in 1995. Heritage Preservation serves as the secretariat of the Task Force, a partnership of 41 national associations and federal agencies.

The initial goal of *Getting Ready in Indian Country* was to identify useful information resources and model practices that would help Native American communities address historic preservation and cultural resources in disaster planning, mitigation, response, and recovery. Heritage Preservation compiled the “Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage,” which is discussed in more detail below. Heritage Preservation then assembled a national review panel of respected professionals to assess the appropriateness and utility of the resources in the inventory and make recommendations for addressing general gaps in content and dissemination. Panel members brought expertise and experience in caring for tribal cultural resources, providing assistance to tribal museums and libraries, working with tribal historic preservation issues, and supplying tribal emergency management services.

The review panel met in Washington, DC, on May 6, 2010, to discuss the inventory and offer feedback on the types of information resources and model practices that have been helpful to tribes and tribal heritage caretakers and how to improve or expand access to them. The panel provided helpful comments on the inventory, but more importantly, the meeting led to a wide-ranging discussion on the broader needs of tribes and tribal cultural institutions and the challenges they face preparing for emergencies. It was also an opportunity to discuss some of the innovative initiatives tribal communities have implemented.

Definitions

The review panel agreed that defining the scope of this report and clarifying the terms used present a challenge. A short list of definitions follows, but the terms “cultural heritage,” “cultural resources,” and “cultural properties” merit special attention. These terms are defined by each tribe and include the people, places, objects, and traditions integral to the community and way of life. All tribal cultural heritage is at risk – not only material objects and structures, but also landscapes, archaeological sites, natural resources, native language, traditions, and customs. All of these expressions of Native American cultural heritage should be considered in emergency planning.

“Tribal” or “Indian” is defined by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as meaning an “Indian tribe, band, nation, or other organized group or community, including a Native village, Regional Corporation or Village Corporation, as those terms are defined in section 3 of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (43 U.S.C. 1602).” Due to their varied histories, as well as changing policies and attitudes within the United States government regarding native status, Native Americans or American Indians are labels that apply to a broad spectrum of individuals, not always easily defined.

FEMA defines “emergency” as “any incident, whether natural or manmade, that requires responsive action to protect life or property.” Similarly, FEMA’s definition of “emergency

management” states that it is “the coordination and integration of all activities necessary to build, sustain, and improve the capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, or mitigate against threatened or actual natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or other manmade disasters.”

“Emergency managers” play a coordinating role before, during, and after disasters and are usually affiliated with tribal, state, county, or city governments. Representatives of FEMA are in this category. The term “first responders” normally refers to professionals dispatched by the 911 system: firefighters, police, and paramedics. Sometimes the term “emergency responders” is used in this report to encompass both emergency managers and first responders.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (16 USC 470w) defines “historic property” or “historic resource” as any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object included in, or eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Property, including artifacts, records, and material remains related to such a property or resource. This report uses “cultural property,” “cultural resource,” and “cultural heritage” to refer to “historic property” and “historic resource” as well as objects and archives that may not be associated with a particular historic property.

"Preservation" or "historic preservation" includes identification, evaluation, recordation, documentation, curation, acquisition, protection, management, rehabilitation, restoration, stabilization, maintenance, research, interpretation, conservation, and education and the training regarding those activities (National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, (16 USC 470w)).

Because there is no universal standard or accepted definition of “cultural heritage” for tribal nations, effective emergency preparedness and response require an appreciation of the differences within and between tribal nations and of the need for flexibility and understanding. This is increasingly recognized and implemented by the agencies and institutions interacting with tribal governments, although more progress is needed.

The Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage

The inventory accompanying this report is a tool for anyone seeking information on emergency preparedness for tribal and other cultural property. It is a compilation of both native and non-native resources. The list is not exhaustive, but it does provide a starting point for accessing a wide variety of materials on the protection of cultural heritage, emergency management practice and policies, and tribal programs. The inventory will be available on Heritage Preservation’s Web site, www.heritagepreservation.org/gettingready, in November 2010.

The “Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage” includes publications, planning tools and templates, informational Web sites, government policies, training programs and other opportunities for professional development, and model projects that address emergencies as they affect cultural resources. The resources in the inventory are organized under seven topics: Emergency Management, Funding, Mitigation, Planning, Response and Recovery, Reference, and Tribal.

In assembling the inventory, Heritage Preservation consulted a number of cultural heritage professionals who have created information resources or offered training programs for tribal governments and institutions. Some resources listed in the inventory are already used by tribes. Examples include FEMA's independent study courses on basic emergency management, the disaster scenarios developed by the California Preservation Program, workshops offered by regional conservation centers, and publications like the *Field Guide to Emergency Response*.

Other resources have been created by tribes but may not be as widely known. For instance, the California Tribal Nations Emergency Management Council, run by the Native American Alliance for Emergency Preparedness, assists tribes with comprehensive emergency management programs. It was created in 2003 to increase the capacity of all California Tribal Nations to develop and sustain programs for hazardous materials management. The disaster plan developed by the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum in Clewiston, Florida, provides a useful planning template.

In its evaluation of the "Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage," the national review panel noted that many of the current information sources addressing both cultural resources and emergency preparedness are focused on objects, collections, and historic structures. Additional resources are needed on emergency preparedness and response for archaeological sites, landscapes, and other places of cultural significance.

Emergency Preparedness and Response in Indian Country

At the Sealaska Heritage Institute in Juneau, Alaska, the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) preserves materials that document the history, culture, and language of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people. SCRC Director Zachary Jones says, "It is vitally important that repositories develop and regularly update a disaster plan to protect collections. When there is an emergency large or small, our plan provides clear instructions on how to minimize potential damage."

Preparing for emergencies is one of the most important things any community or institution can do to preserve cultural heritage for future generations. Successful preparation involves a process in which caretakers of cultural heritage work together to assess the risks to their resources and then develop a plan for action, complete with priorities. Preparation also involves building relationships with the public safety officials tasked with disaster response and the emergency management agencies responsible for planning, mitigation, and recovery.

The emergency planning process for cultural resources need not be complicated. Sometimes simple steps, such as having a list of emergency contacts at hand, can make a big difference. All preparedness strategies in Indian Country must be tailored, however. Tribal cultural institutions and centers may be in remote places, so access can be an issue, particularly in winter. The financial resources, operations, and governance for the care of cultural heritage, as well as for emergency management, vary widely among tribes.

There are currently 564 federally recognized Indian tribes in the United States; 102 have Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPO). Some nations have museums, libraries, and archives,

which may or may not be operated by the tribal government or THPO. In others, objects of cultural and historic significance are kept in cultural centers, private homes, or on tribal lands.

There is also considerable variety in the structure and nature of emergency management and public safety systems. Indian nations have the right to self-government, and they are responsible for their own services, from economic development, health, education, and environmental policies to legal, judicial, and social matters, to managing and protecting natural and cultural resources. Some tribes have their own emergency management agencies and fire departments, while others work with neighboring governments for all or a combination of these services. In either case, these agencies may or may not include cultural heritage in their official emergency response plans.

Relationships between the stewards of cultural heritage and emergency responders need to be established before disasters happen. In Indian Country, the communication requires dedication and sensitivity. For instance, a tribe may be reluctant to share information with a county fire department about the location of sacred objects or sites. The protocols for handling and working with objects also vary among tribes, so prior knowledge of tribal customs is essential during the response and recovery process. This is true for both public safety officials as well as volunteers responding from other native or non-native museums, libraries, or archives.

Talking About Preparedness

The review panel for *Getting Ready in Indian Country* placed great emphasis on the importance of listening and sharing information as the way to learn about any issue, including emergency preparedness. They recognized the rich diversity of tribal experience and practice, the differences among tribes in available resources for planning, and the wide range of systems and approaches to emergency response. Discussion questions seemed the best way to engage tribal communities on the issue of protecting cultural resources from natural and manmade disasters. The attached questions touch on basic elements of preparedness. They are designed to be a starting point for conversations within tribes and among caretakers of tribal heritage. They can be used at tribal gatherings, workshops, or staff meetings. The “Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage” should be a helpful companion to these questions.

Recommendations

Heritage Preservation and the national review panel for *Getting Ready in Indian Country* agree that there are many possibilities for creative projects and approaches to help strengthen emergency preparedness for tribes and tribal cultural resources. Heritage Preservation makes the following recommendations:

- Funding agencies should encourage and support the development of new initiatives to increase tribal preparedness for emergencies affecting cultural resources. Sample projects might include: a roster of regional contacts for technical assistance during emergencies; a compilation of case studies on tribal preparedness; or a directory of funding sources for tribal emergency planning, mitigation, and training activities.

- Organizations, agencies, and nations developing initiatives for Indian Country should emphasize capacity-building. Practical information should be made more compelling and relevant through illustrations and tribal case studies.
- Organizations and agencies that offer workshops and technical assistance on risk assessment, emergency planning, and disaster response should increase outreach efforts to tribes. Their programs should recognize and respect the variety in tribal customs, traditions, and practices for handling and preserving tribal cultural resources, as well as the limits in sharing information about them.
- Most current disaster information tools and training address objects, archives, and historic structures. More guidance is needed for the protection of place. New resources on emergency preparedness and response for archaeological sites, landscapes, and locations associated with traditional practice should be developed.
- Emergency management agencies and public safety departments serving tribal nations should learn more about traditions and practices regarding the preservation of cultural heritage and adapt or develop their response strategies in consultation with tribal leadership and others responsible for cultural resources.
- Emergency management agencies and public safety departments – whether part of tribal governments or serving tribal lands – should include cultural heritage in official emergency plans.

Acknowledgements

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Getting Ready in Indian Country is intended to serve as a catalyst for new initiatives to strengthen emergency preparedness for tribes, especially to protect the traditions and heritage of their people. Please share the “Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage” and the Preparedness Discussion Questions widely. By working together, much can be accomplished.

ATTACHMENTS

Preparedness Discussion Questions
 Review Panel Member Biographies
 Inventory of Disaster Resources for Cultural Heritage