

CANADIAN MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION
DEACCESSIONING
GUIDELINES



A. Clarification of Terms

Deaccessioning is the formal process of removal of an object from the collection of an institution.

Disposal is the physical removal of the object from the organization by the process decided upon by the governing authority of an institution.

B. Introduction

There is nothing wrong inherently about deaccessioning! Deaccessioning is a necessary and appropriate tool in the collections management for any museum or gallery. Curatorially-motivated disposal is an integral part of collection management and a way for a museums or gallery to refine its collection. Often times, an object does not fit the organization's scope of collections, cannot be cared for properly or poses a hazard to staff, so the object may be considered for deaccessioning. Disposing of an item is not without risk, however, significant benefits may be accrued if the disposal process is properly managed.

The CMA's Deaccessioning Guidelines provides general information and guidance on curatorially-motivated disposal from an institution's collection. The Guidelines do not discuss individual types of collections and the potential issues that may relate to specific collections. Nor do the guidelines cover disposal through return or repatriation.

The purpose of the Guidelines is to serve as a stimulus for institutions to consider a range of factors when making any decision concerning deaccessioning of an object(s). They are intended to ensure that the disposal benefits your institution, your collection and the community you serve.

The CMA Guidelines should be used in conjunction with your institution's existing collection policy and should not be considered a substitute for legal advice. The guardianship of an institution's collection is vested within the institution's governing body. This body must determine that the decisions made to deaccession an object(s) meets the standards of expertise and has to take into account the potential legal ramifications of all the stakeholders. The final decision to deaccession an object(s) must be approved by the governing authority and fully documented.

Whatever the course of action an institution chooses to undertake, the decision must be articulated clearly with proper documentation.

C. The Ethics and Legalities of Deaccessioning

The CMA Guidelines fully support the responsible disposal of an object(s) from an institution's collection as long as the ethical and legal requirements are adhered to.

C1. Key Ethical Considerations include:

- Examine/understand your institution's goals and mandate/ revised mandate vis-à-vis disposal of an object(s)
- Know and understand your institution's collection policy and/or create one
- Manage the process effectively by defining the reasons why you are Deaccessioning
- Demonstrate the benefits to both the institution's collection and to its stakeholders

C2. Key Legal Considerations include:

- Review documentation of any object(s) you are considering to deaccession to determine any legal restrictions that prohibits the institution's ability to dispose of an object(s).
- Restrictions may include specific legislation; the charitable status of the institution; conditions attached to a specific donation or bequest of an object(s).
- In the event the institution is planning to deaccession an unaccessioned item where the provenance is not clearly established, a risk assessment of this decision should be undertaken.
- When there is any doubt on the legality of the disposal, consult independent legal counsel.

D. The Why's and When's to Deaccession

D1. The primary outcomes for deaccessioning an object(s) include:

- Improved care for the object(s)
- Improved access to the object(s)
- Retention of an object(s) within the community
- Removal of a potentially hazardous item

D2. Factors to consider:

- Why was the object(s) initially acquired?
- Is the object(s) currently in use or on display?
- Is the object(s) redundant?
- Would the object(s) be better suited in another institution's collection?

D3. Why Deaccession?

There may be a number of valid reasons why your institution will deaccession an object(s), including:

- Relevancy** — The collecting focus of the institution has been refined or altered and the object(s) are no relevant to the institution's mandate and goals.
- Duplication** — The object(s) is a duplicate. Does it make sense to have one or more of the object(s) in the collection?

- iii. **Under-used** — some object(s) have never even seen the light of day. If there is little or no likelihood of the object(s) being displayed, it may be appropriate to deaccession.
- iv. **Deterioration** — the object(s) over time has been damaged or slowly deteriorated. The costs of conservation outweigh the value to the collection.
- v. **Hazardous** — Institutions may have an object(s) within their collection that poses a potential health and safety issue to their staff or visitors.
- vi. **Storage** — institutions may simply be unable to store the object(s) properly.
- vii. **Provenance** — The original owner or family member has provided legal title indicating the institution does not legally own the object(s).

E. Who Should be Involved in the Consultative Process?

While the final decision of whether or not an institution may successfully deaccession an Object(s) rests with the governing body, input from the following stakeholders should be sought in the process of reaching a final decision:

- i. **Institutional Staff** — as well as curatorial and exhibition staff, include individuals working in a wide range of disciplines within the institution — marketing, interpretation, education and visitor services.
- ii. **Donors** — in each instance, institutions must consider the original terms and conditions surrounding the donation. Where possible, donors should be consulted at the initial decision stage as well as to inform them on a courtesy basis. In some cases the object(s) maybe returned to the original donor.
- iii. **External funders** — in the event the deaccessioned object(s) were acquired or conserved using external funds, the appropriate funding body should be consulted.
- iv. **Stakeholders** — Institutions should consult with other individuals who have a vested interest in the respective collection. Stakeholders may include, visitors, researchers and in the case of contemporary art, living artists. Consideration should be given to striking a panel of stakeholders ensuring that the objective of openness and transparency in the deaccessioning process are met.

F. Determining How the Object(s) was Acquired

The current status of an object(s) and the method by which the institution acquired it should be fully investigated and determined prior to reaching a decision to deaccession the object(s).

The following represent traditional methods of acquiring an object:

- i. **Purchase** — if the item was purchased with the assistance of a funding agency contact the relevant body to determine the appropriate course of action.
- ii. **Donation or Bequest** — determine what the conditions were at the time the object(s) was donated and the adverse affect that deaccessioning the object might have.
- iii. **Loan** — if the item is on loan, contact the lender to discuss the return of the object(s).

G. Method of Divestment

Whatever your institution determines is the best way to deaccession an object(s) the following methods should be taken into consideration for placing an object(s):

- i. **Accredited Institutions** — Identify accredited museums with appropriate collections that may be interested in acquiring the object(s). Where possible preference should be given to this method of deaccessioning an object(s).
- ii. **Third Parties** — Identify other parties who may be interested in the object(s) and approach directly. This method should only be considered in the event, that no other institution is able to acquire the object(s).
- iii. **Return to Donor** — If it is impossible to maintain an object(s) in the public domain and no other institution is able to acquire the object(s) an institution may consider returning an item to the donors. This method is without serious ramifications which may include:
 - Is the institution legally able to return the object(s)?
 - Can the donor be traced?
 - Is the institution risking dispute by the donor or family members?
 - What will the reaction of the public be?

H. How to Manage the Process

Any undertaking involving deaccessioning of an object(s) by an institution will require significant resources and work. Careful planning and thorough management will help to ensure the successful outcome. Prior to commencing the process be sure to consider:

- Create a timeline to assist in the management of the process.
- Deaccessioning is not without hard costs. Create a budget to ensure that all the necessary resources including staff time are available to complete the task
- Identify what staff will be involved in the process and their specific responsibilities.
- Develop both an internal and external communication strategy
- Finalize a structure for reviewing, reporting and approving the various tasks.

I. The Consequences of an Unethical Decision to Deaccession

Unethical decisions to deaccession object(s) from your collection may have significant and often negative consequences for your institution. These may include:

- Loss or damage of your community's trust
- Adverse and negative publicity affecting the institution's ability to secure funding
- A negative impact on the working relationships with other institutions who may decline to work collaboratively or become unwilling to loan object(s)

CHECKLIST FOR DEACCESSIONING OBJECTS

Initial steps

- ✓ Consider undertaking a full review of the collection
- ✓ Develop a project plan and allocate staff resources to manage the process
- ✓ Create an assessment framework to assist in evaluating objects within the collection and their suitability for disposal
- ✓ Secure your institution's governing body's agreement to the potential deaccessioning of the object(s)

Making the Critical Decision to Deaccession

- ✓ Make decisions to dispose as part of an overall collections management strategy/policy within your institution
- ✓ Specify the desired outcome
- ✓ Articulate the curatorial reasons for deaccessioning an object(s)
- ✓ Seek independent specialist advice, if necessary
- ✓ Consider the views of all stakeholders
- ✓ Develop a communications strategy
- ✓ Ensure the museum is legally able to deaccession the object(s)
- ✓ Recommend a method of disposal

Key Considerations

- ✓ What is the desired end result?
- ✓ If successful, how will the method of disposal help to achieve the desired outcome?
- ✓ What are the benefits of the course of action selected?
- ✓ What is the potential for increased use of the item through the proposed course of action? (In the case of object(s) being recycled or destroyed, there may be none)
- ✓ Is the proposed recipient able to provide adequate care and opportunities for access?
- ✓ What might the public reaction be?
- ✓ What if any are the potential risks?

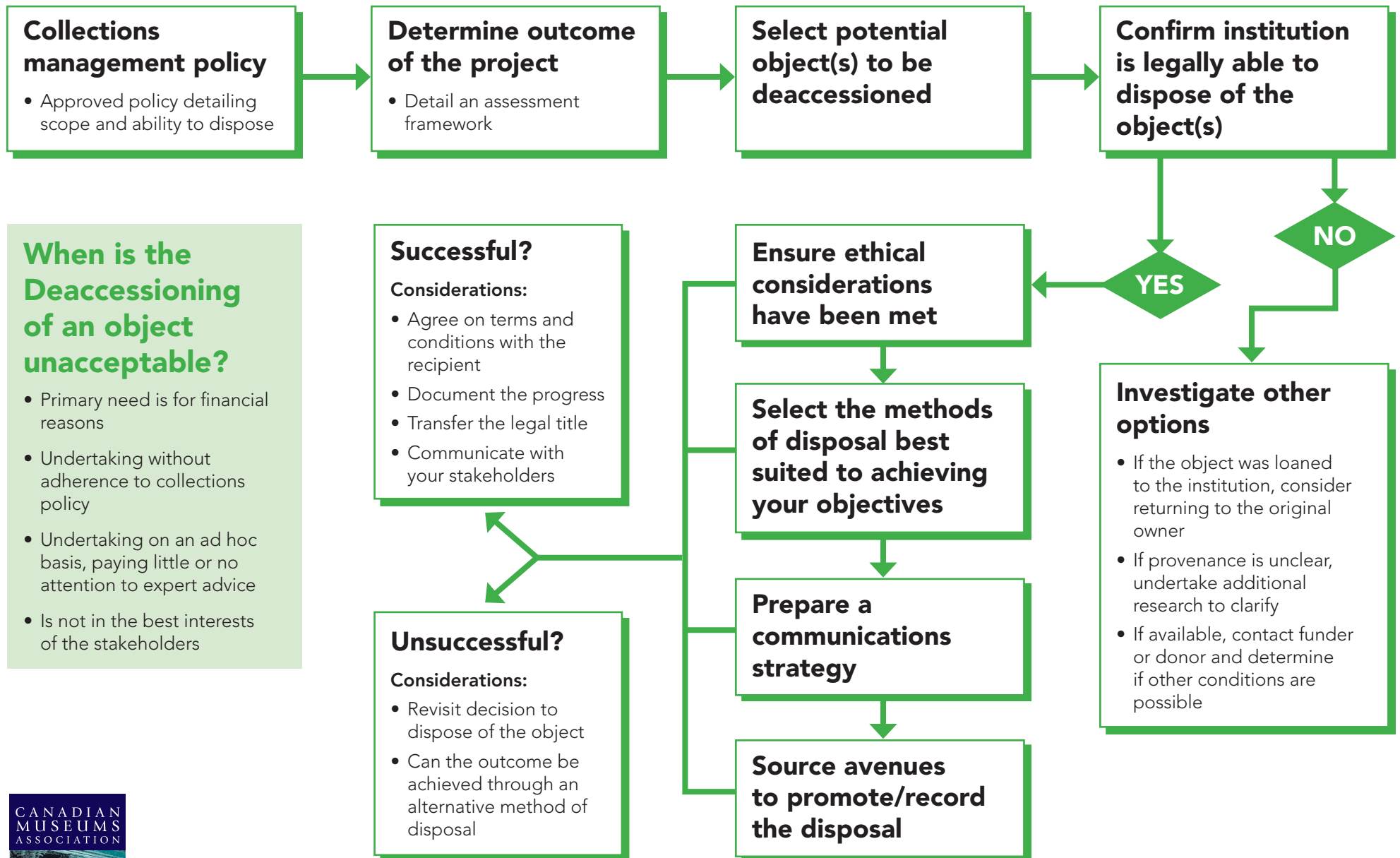
What to do now the decision has been made

- ✓ Identify potential appropriate institutional recipients and contact directly
- ✓ Publicize the availability of the object(s) through the CMA, other specialist publications and websites.
- ✓ Inform the donor, if applicable
- ✓ If a new location can be found, agree terms and conditions of transfer (or sale)
- ✓ Ensure complete transparency and communicate the disposal to the public
- ✓ Ensure transfer of legal title to the recipient
- ✓ Document the process.

What to do if the attempt to deaccession an item is unsuccessful

- Reconsider the institutions' decision to deaccession and object
- Consider possible alternative uses of the object(s) with the institution
- Consider whether the desired outcome could be achieved through another method of disposal

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When is the Deaccessioning of an object unacceptable?

- Primary need is for financial reasons
- Undertaking without adherence to collections policy
- Undertaking on an ad hoc basis, paying little or no attention to expert advice
- Is not in the best interests of the stakeholders

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