Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: The Sponge Bath

Author(s): Jaeschke, R. & Jaeschke, H.

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monitoring pest levels and environmental conditions so that we should quickly notice any worrying changes. This also means that all of our store areas are visited on a regular basis by staff; a strict timetable is vital. Accurate record-keeping is also vital.

One day Bolton Museum may have the facilities to care for its natural history collections adequately but until then we feel that we have arrived at a reasonable strategy involving sensible amounts of staff time, section money, health and safety and minimal risk to collections.

Note:

Since writing this article the new Control of Substances Hazardous to Health regulations have come into force (as of 1 October 1989). These are generally known as COSHH. We will now have to rethink our policy as concerns the use of Dichlorvos and it remains to be seen whether or not it is possible to achieve a viable pest control strategy in existing store areas.

Steve Garland
Senior Keeper, Natural History
Bolton Museum and Art Gallery

PS
If you haven't heard of COSHH I suggest you contact your council safety officer, local environment health department or nearest Health and Safety Executive for urgent advice. It will mean an end to curators working in offices and stores containing fumigants.

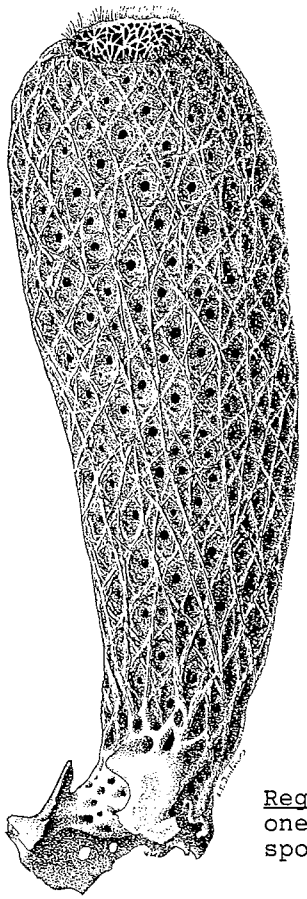
THE SPONGE BATH

The glassy skeletons of sponges, especially the Venus Flowerbasket type appear to gather dust and dirt in direct proportion to their fragility, presenting the curator with a depressing sight or a seemingly formidable task of cleaning. Cheer up! The answer is rapid, simple, cheap and safe and requires no fancy equipment or training.

EQUIPMENT

1 A supply of distilled or deionised water sufficient to allow for one wash basin and two or three rinses of each sponge. If the tapwater available is very pure, the distilled or deionised water may be used for just the two final rinses.

2 A small amount of non-ionic detergent, Synperonic N for example. This is obtainable from many laboratory suppliers or from Archival Aids, PO Box 5, Spondon, Derby DE2 7BP. Only a few drops per pint of water are needed, sufficient to provide a small head of foam.



Regadrella phoenix, one of the glass sponges.

3 Clean waterproof tanks in which to wash the sponges. Glass specimen jars are ideal, also beakers, bowls and plastic wash tubs. Ensure that the sponge will slide easily in and out of the jar, that there is no lip on which it might catch, and that when it is in the jar you can manoeuvre it without difficulty, maintaining your grip until the sponge is resting on the bottom.

4 A sink or drain, for disposing of the water.

If you have jars of the right size and shape, so that you can hold the sponge and gently lower it to the bottom, no further equipment is necessary. If you have particularly large or awkward specimens, which you wish to wash in situ in their own jars, or if you have only long, narrow jars available, you will need a small amount of flexible tubing to syphon the water in and out, making sure that there is room in the jar for both specimen and tube. If you do not wish to hold the sponges by hand, place them in a 'chip basket' of clean wire or plastic mesh before lowering them into the container. If you are afraid of damage when the sponge rests on the bottom of the jar (if it has a broken or fragile end, for

example) pad the bottom of the jar with a small amount of plastic sheeting, or polythene foam (eg Plastazote) making sure that the padding stays at the bottom when the water is added.

PROCEDURE

Step 1. Ensure that the washtank to be used is clean, and that the sponge will fit inside easily and will be submerged when the water is added. Remove the sponge. Fill the jar with room temperature clean water, preferably distilled or deionised, to which a few drops of non-ionic detergent have been added. Make sure the detergent is well mixed in.

Step 2. Lower the sponge **slowly** into the washwater until it rests on the bottom. Bubbles of air will often remain trapped in the lattice of the sponge. Most of these can be removed by raising and lowering the sponge gently once or twice, or by gently moving the water with a stirrer, taking care not to come close to the sponge. Leave the sponge for 5-10 minutes depending on the degree of dirt. **Do not** leave the sponge unattended and **do not** be tempted to increase the soaking time in an attempt to remove further dirt, unless the sponge is under continual careful observation. It is possible that some degraded or weakened specimens might be damaged by prolonged soaking.

Step 3. Remove the sponge slowly from the bath and lay it gently on a clean surface to drain. **Never** bring it in contact with cotton wool or terry towelling, two materials guaranteed to catch on the spicules. Empty the washwater, rinse the jar with clean water and fill with distilled or deionised water to rinse. Gently lower the sponge into the rinse water and leave for a minute or two. Remove the sponge, empty the jar, fill with fresh rinsewater and repeat.

Step 4. Remove the sponge from the final rinse water and lay it on a clean surface to drain. The sponge can be replaced in a clean, dry specimen jar to dry, or in any well ventilated place. If possible, cover the container in which the sponge is drying with paper or cloth to prevent dust settling on the clean surface.

CAUTION

Before washing any specimen, check for signs of damage or repair which might have been carried out with water soluble glues or coatings. If in any doubt, test a small area with water for any sign of change.

If others use the same area, leave plenty of warning signs around. A sink with a few sponges drying in the bottom may look empty at first glance.

Don't try to use ordinary household detergent or soap solutions. Non-ionic detergent is the simplest, the safest and the best.

Don't skimp on the rinses. Any hardwater deposits drying on the sponges will leave unsightly marks which will be very difficult to remove later.

Don't be tempted to leave the sponges in water for longer than a few minutes. Pure water can etch or dissolve glasses and the specimens may become more susceptible with age.

Don't hurry. Careful handling and slow movements are safest when dealing with items this fragile.

Finally, if you do encounter problems, particularly stubborn stains, or unusual reactions, please let us know.

Richard and Helena Jaeschke, Conservators, 3 Park Gardens, Lynton, Devon EX35 6DF.

Committee News

A DAY OF MOURNING FOR BIOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

Wednesday 28 February 1990 has been declared an official 'Day of Mourning' for our neglected and decaying natural heritage. BCG members and other natural history curators are being asked to reveal examples of badly curated, neglected or decaying natural history specimens to the press and public. Better still, find a scientifically valuable collection or group of specimens which are in bad shape owing to lack of cash, and would benefit from additional funds.

Please complete and post the enclosed Press Release to your local press/radio station, and have a supply of Sunflower campaign leaflets handy on the day. BCG will contact the national press. This is the next phase in the 'Decaying Natural Heritage' campaign, which has already attracted much attention and some funding. The rest is up to you. Black armbands, coffins, wakes, and dirges, and similar stunts for the media are all possibilities. Note that 28 February 1990 is Ash Wednesday.