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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Madrid

Yes finally, an account of the much talked about conference which is likely to affect the philosophy of biological curation for some time to come. Apologies to the writers of other accounts which seem to have been mislaid in the great flood of Perth.

The International Symposium and First World Congress on the preservation and Conservation of Natural History Collections was held in Madrid on 10-15 May 1992

Billed as an attempt to meet the challenges of preserving Natural History Collections for the next 500 years this symposium promised to be a significant event in the future of all Natural History Museums. In actual fact it was rather difficult to work out from the initial literature just what the content would be. The three main components seemed to be a 4 or 5 day conference with an associated collection care training course followed on the last day by a World Congress. This certainly seemed to be a unique opportunity, but how did it live up to the participants' expectations? This is not an easy question to answer since the ambiguous preliminary literature led many people to a variety of ideas about what they were in for.

On the whole I would suggest that few people were disappointed overall by the week in Madrid (not least because of the weather!) because a great many wide ranging issues were covered. The disappointed were mainly those expecting a rather more specialised week covering practical preservation methods – quite justifiably considering the conference title. However, what we got was far more general in content and global in outlook. I think it is fair to say that those from a national museum dealing with taxonomy and having global collecting policies will certainly have taken more from this symposium than the average UK conservator.

Much of the discussion in the general sessions reflected the need for more work and resources into biodiversity studies and their attendant collection and taxonomy problems. Much time was given to exploring the role that major western (First World) museums play in promoting

collection care in the places where many of the specimens are taken, the Third World. In this context, restitution of cultural and natural heritage was frequently raised – albeit minus the controversial contribution from Jonathan Haas of the Chicago Field Museum (the cause of an unfortunately complex final voting session on the Friday).

Another frequently raised point was the sheer enormity of our job of cataloguing the natural world, provoking the coining by Bob May of the expression 'quick and dirty' for new means of effectively covering the task of describing our biota. Solutions to this ranging from systematic collections management to the training of so-called field para-taxonomists.

These wider global issues were rather more than many of us had expected from the conference. Many wanting more discussion of the how's of preservation than the why's of collection management. This said, however, the standard of presentation was very high, with addresses from many leaders in their field leaving us in no doubt of the importance and enormity of our task. Not only of preserving but promoting the preservation of natural history collections.

Some personal highlights were the talks by Phil Doughty on collections assessment and long range planning; Lord Dainton with his outsider's view of the secret garden (!); Ron McGinley on planning for and managing collection growth ("for they don't know what they are doing . . ."); and Cliff McCauley's honest look at the role of ICOM.

The general sessions were held in the main hall of the Superior Council of Scientific Research but each afternoon delegates were transferred to the Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. Here were held discussions of the morning presentations, meetings of special interest groups, large numbers of poster presentations and the training workshops. This was also the base for the resources centre which contained a wide range of references, data bases and conservation materials for delegates to get their teeth into.

The training workshops were certainly the reason (and justification) for the presence of many of the technical conservation staff. They gave an opportunity to catch up with the present state of play in natural history conservation and to obtain information that is quite simply not yet available on conservation techniques. Each session was led by recognised experts and from the experience of the sessions which I attended were of an exceptionally high standard.

The main problem in the afternoon and evening sessions was that of timetabling. Whereas several of the general morning sessions covered the same topic, each of the concurrent workshops were one-off and attendance at one meant missing another. Equally due to traffic, late lunches and other organisational flaws, attendance at the timetabled sessions left little or no time for viewing the posters, doing justice to the resource centre, or attending special interest meetings. For example, one discussion session had to be missed in order that the UK reps could get together to discuss the formation of a national natural history conservation group.

Tighter time-keeping all round would have made life a lot easier. With more than a 60 hour week it certainly cannot be said that there was nothing to do. One can only imagine what the Spanish organisers made of 12 hour days with no siesta!

The World Congress on the final day was an attempt to sum the week up and produce resolutions which among other things could be put before the 'Earth Summit' (UNCED) at Rio in June. These outlined many of the pressing issues related to natural history collections care and use which had been discussed throughout the week. These included recommendations for research and development in conservation techniques; the training of systematists and collection managers; promotion of collections through public awareness; and the establishment of museums in developing countries. The resolutions look impressive and summarise the importance and plight of natural history collections well but whether they are given the attention they deserve at Rio or elsewhere remains to be seen. It will be interesting to see if things have moved forward at

all for the second congress to be held again in Spain in 4 years time. Unless Mr Clinton recognises that even Americans will benefit from understanding the world they live in, I suspect not!

Although this was an excellent symposium, I would suggest that the next one should concentrate more on the specifics of collection management or invite a different type of delegate and try preaching to the *unconverted*.

My attendance in Madrid was made possible by generous grant aid from the MGC Conservation Unit.

Paul Richards, Sheffield Museum

Annual Meeting of Herbarium Curators

During a recent visit to Missouri Botanical Garden I was able to join an informal meeting of herbarium curators which is held every year during the Annual Plant Systematics symposium at St. Louis. Readers of the ASC newsletter will know that American curators face many of the same problems as ours, and it was interesting to hear how they propose to solve them.

The longest discussion was on the subject of charging for access to information derived from specimen data. Particular problems have arisen from the reluctance of environmental consultancies to deposit summary data arising from their studies in institutes which have supplied some of the raw data. This has prompted a move towards the development of written policies governing the use of information, so that those having access to specimen data agree in advance to let the supplier have access to the finished product.

Other uses for which greater consistency on charging policies was being sought included artists/illustrators, some of whom are able to persuade their publishers to offer benefits in kind in exchange for access; loans for display, particularly where charges are needed to cover the costs of conservation assessment; and "data leasing", a rather novel concept whereby consultants can use the data for a specified period