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Author(s): Edmondson, J.

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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

after which the agreement lapses. This creates a category of "time-expired" data which are no longer in the public domain. It is intriguing to think that data might be accessed rather like loans of specimens, to be handed back after a specified period, but I can't see how one polices such a system. Most curators agreed that the biggest task was to educate the market to expect charges; in this respect, non-profit organisations are less inclined to accept charges than are commercial concerns, most of whom pass them on to their clients. Computerisation of collections data has led to a notable increase in the levels of requests, as users begin to appreciate the value of information held in databases.

The second major topic of discussion was on conservation concerns, with particular reference to the pro's and con's of deep-freezing. The feeling at the meeting was that the risks of causing cracking of specimens glued directly to paper had been over-stated in a recent article in *Taxon*, and that control of humidity fluctuations during freezing was sufficient to avoid such problems. Double-dip freezing, however, was becoming more common, except where large volumes are handled in walk-in freezers.

There was a short discussion of the latest developments in on-line access to databases. Many American herbaria are linked through INTERNET, a network analogous to JANET, and a number of new services are now freely available for the price of a call. Jane Lowry (New Mexico) maintains a directory of plant taxonomists on-line through BITNET. Missouri Botanical Garden is linked to several members of the Flora of North America editorial committee, giving them access to the TROPICOS database as well as e-mail facilities. The Grey Herbarium Card Index, a new world equivalent to Index Kewensis, has now been entered on computer and will be available from Jim Beach (Harvard) as a completely free downloadable service. This contrasts sharply with Kew's plans for a CD-ROM version of Index Kewensis; alarming rumours were circulating about the prices of the original data and updates. One of the most valuable aspects of the whole meeting was the chance to discover that one's problems are indeed shared by fellow curators. It

was uncanny, indeed, to hear people's experiences of seeking advice from government offices on the application of the CITES regulations; sounds familiar? It is a pity that BCG meetings do not yet attract a high percentage of herbarium curators in Britain, and I hope that this issue might perhaps be tackled soon by way of a special meeting. To make this a practical proposition, I would suggest that herbarium curators should have an informal get-together in Liverpool during the forthcoming conference on "Conservation in the herbarium" on the 14th May, 1993. Contact me for further details.

*John Edmondson, National Museum & Galleries
on Merseyside, Liverpool Museum, William
Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN.*

World in our Hands

Five years ago the Natural History Department debated ideas for new permanent exhibitions and top of the list was the environment. The next step was to plan it out. I discovered that although previous exhibitions had focused on individual environmental issues no-one had attempted to deal with the problems worldwide. Environmental problems effect us all, where ever we live, and this was the line I wanted to take. But how?

Agonizing over this problem one morning a solution suddenly came to mind. There would be five sections in the exhibition:

- (1) *a dramatic introduction* to orientate visitors;
- (2) *single species extinctions* showing extinctions through human activities;
- (3) *habitat destruction* showing why habitats are more important than single species;
- (4) *why wildlife matters* explaining why we need plants and animals for our survival;
- (5) *what can be done* describing how environmental problems can be solved.

After a long process of discussion and refinement the plan gradually took shape. We linked up with various outside environmental projects such as the Programme for Belize, which is creating tropical forest reserves and is featured in the exhibition.