



<http://www.natsca.org>

NSCG Newsletter

Title: Report: BCG study trip to Museum Naturalis, Leiden, Netherlands

Author(s): Hatton, J.

Source: Hatton, J. (2000). Report: BCG study trip to Museum Naturalis, Leiden, Netherlands. *NSCG Newsletter, Issue 13*, 22 - 24.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/670>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Report: BCG study trip to Museum Naturalis, Leiden, Netherlands

Jo Hatton, Assistant Curator, Grant Museum of Zoology & Comparative Anatomy, Dept. Biology Darwin Building University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

On Friday 29th October 1999, thirty-five curators, conservators and museum managers visited the National Museum of Natural History in Leiden to view the new museum building, exhibitions and collection storage facilities. The new Museum, known as *Naturalis* to the public, is situated on the outskirts of Leiden and is a short walk from the main railway station. The Museum is housed in a converted historic hospital and is connected to the impressive 60 metre high purpose built collections storage tower by means of a glass sided bridge. This spans the width of the waterway encircling the Museum; after all, we wouldn't be in Holland if we weren't next to a canal!

On arrival we were warmly welcomed and given a brief introductory talk by the Associate Director, Dr Jan Krikken, who outlined details of the new developments along with his colleagues experiences. The building work took 2½ years to complete, the collections being moved during 1997-98. New exhibitions, focusing on current global nature conservation issues such as biodiversity and ecosystems were also developed during this time.

The Museum holds zoological and geological collections numbering 15 million specimens in 6 million registered lots, with 1-2 million of these databased. Departments are divided into those of Zoology and Geology, with subdivisions of Vertebrates, Entomology, Invertebrates, and Palaeontology, Mineralogy/Petrology respectively. The Botany Department and herbarium is housed in another building.

Each department has a head, curators and technicians and overall there are about 60 permanent staff, this includes; 24 research curators and 30 collection technicians. In addition, they are host to 30 research associates, honorary collaborators, students and project staff. The Museum publishes four regular scientific journals, newsletters and books. The public galleries are visited by 300,000 visitors each year and between 400-500 scientific visitors to the collections. The annual budget for the Museum currently stands at 26 million Dutch Guilders (£7 million). Research, as in most national museum institutions is high on the agenda. Current research emphasis is placed upon conservation of the fauna and geology of the

Netherlands, Europe and globally. Collection management policies are based around the research programmes, internal collection evaluation, societal requirements and logistic and quality criteria.

Dr Krikken seemed generally pleased with the new building. Of his personal assessment criteria, including manoeuvring space, specimen location (dot score), collection security, calamity risk, temp/RH, chemical/dust impact, air-tightness, specimen handling and working environment, had all improved considerably after the move. However, the architecture of the building did not come without criticism. In the tower, some store room floors were not level, causing problems in setting down new cabinets, and there was insufficient access for bringing in large objects such as cetacean skeletons.

The rest of the morning was taken up with guided tours of the public exhibition areas courtesy of four members of the collections team, after which we were free to explore the museum galleries for ourselves. The two most exciting exhibitions, 'Fossils Parade' and 'Nature's Theatre' were visually stunning, very 'now' in design and appearance. Lots of glass and spotlighting (think Paris and New York darling), though somewhat lacking in general interpretation, sometimes only a Latin name was used, but what it did have in abundance were real specimens, and lots of them! Frogs and jellyfish and other animals, plants and fungi preserved in fluid, ferns and flowering plants mounted not on herbarium sheets, but sandwiched between glass so that you could see both sides. The two exhibition floors were connected via a colossal family tree, spanning 3.8 billion years. This could be lit up and used to link extinct forms to their modern counterparts on the floor above. As difficult to explain as it was to follow when you were there.

The Nature information centre, a staffed study room containing books, drawers of insects and mounted animals native to the Netherlands was a cross between a discovery centre and a more traditional library. This provided a relaxed space where visitors could identify local wildlife or simply search for information on a particular plant or animal. The Museum shop was a haven for both children and adults alike, along with the ubiquitous model dinosaurs pencils and rubbers, a myriad of textbooks and identification guides were available to purchase, something we often find lacking in our typical UK Museum gift shop. For the young at heart, the Children's activity centre proved to be one of the most fun areas in the museum. Here, the audience could learn about the various diets of different animals. Visitors were able to insert replica food items into the mouth of large toy creatures, which would then be accepted or rejected (spat out!) depending on the accuracy of the choice.

After our generous sit down lunch we commenced the most eagerly anticipated part of our visit, the tour of the collections in the new custom built storage tower. Led by the collection curators, four groups were given guided tours of, either Zoology, Geology or Botany with a switch over half way through the afternoon. Like the rest of the Museum the collections storage facilities in the tower were of a high standard. Each floor of the tower contained environmentally controlled collection storage areas, each with its own air filtration system to cut down on the effects of pollution and dust. These were vast rooms kitted out with static Dex-ion™ racking on open shelves, which contained new metal cabinets and much of the original storage furniture brought over from the old site.

Security and safety in the new building was a priority. The engine room in the basement contained an argon gas fire protection safety system for all the fluid collection rooms, and all electronic switches were placed on the outside of the stores to reduce the opportunity for sparks to initiate an explosion. Access for visitors in and out of the collection storage rooms was also carefully restricted, with persons being in effect locked in and let out only under the supervision of a curator.

Seven designated rooms housed the Museums fluid preserved collections. Prior to the move, all of the wet collections were fumigated, as many had previously suffered fungal attack. They were fogged with formalin vapour and cleaned with alcohol. No incidence of its return had been observed since the move, a testament to the effectiveness of exacting temperature and humidity control in these rooms. Curators also reported no incidence of pest attack since moving to the new building, presumably due to their diligence in spraying with insecticide four times a year, and twice over the rest of the building! The majority of the vertebrate collections, such as mounted mammals and birds were also cleaned and conserved before the move (this must have been a monumental task).

Adjacent to the collection storage areas, spacious offices and preparation rooms were provided for research, curatorial and conservation requirements, although most of the staff still complained about lack of space. Most of us were left drooling over the thought of even sharing such facilities in which to work.

Our visit to *Naturalis* was excellent, we received a most warm reception from our Dutch colleagues, and would like to thank them for their most generous hospitality. Much valuable exchange of knowledge and experience took place, and many alliances and connections were made. Thank you Leiden, for hosting a most stimulating visit.

N.S.C.G. Committee Members

Chair

Bob Entwistle
Ipswich Museum
High Street
IPSWICH
Suffolk
IP1 3QH
Tel: 01473 213761/2
Fax: 01473 281274

Secretary

Paul Brown
Department of Entomology
Natural History Museum
Cromwell Road
LONDON
SW7 5BD
Tel: 0207 942 5196
Fax: 0207 942 5229
E-mail: pab@nhm.ac.uk

Treasurer

Kate Andrew
Ludlow Museum
Old Street
LUDLOW
Shropshire
SY8 1NW
Tel: 01584 873857
Fax: 01584 872019

Membership Secretary

Maggie Reilly
Assistant Curator of Zoology
Hunterian Museum
Glasgow University
GLASGOW
G12 8QQ
Tel: 0141 330 4772
Fax: 0141 330 5971
E-mail: mreilly@museum.gla.ac.uk

Editor

Darren J. Mann
Oxford University Museum of Natural
History
Parks Road
OXFORD
OX1 3PW
Tel: 01865 272 957
Fax: 01865 272 970
E-mail: darren.mann@zoo.ox.ac.uk

Editorial Team

Juliet Hay
Matt Stephens
Steve Thompson

Committee Members

Adrian Doyle
Conservation Laboratory
The Natural History Museum
Cromwell Road
LONDON
SW7 5BD
Tel: 0207 942 5538
Fax: 0207 942 5546
E-mail: amd@nhm.ac.uk

Nick Gordon
New Walk Museum
New Walk
LEICESTER
LE1 7EA
TEL: 0116 245 3030
Fax: 0116 245 4100 x 3030

Simon Moore
Hampshire County Museums
Chilcomb House
Chilcomb Lane
WINCHESTER
SO23 8RD
Tel: 01962 846337
Fax: 01962 869836
E-mail: musmsm@hants.gov.uk

Victoria J Purewal
National Museum & Galleries of Wales
Cathays Park
CARDIFF
CF1 3NP
Tel: 01222 573345
Fax: 01222 239829
E-mail: vicky.purewal@nmgw.ac.uk

Glenys Wass
Department of Geological Sciences
University College London
Gower Street
LONDON
WC1E 6BT
Tel: 0171 380 7900
Fax: 0171 387 1612
E-mail: g.wass@ucl.ac.uk