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Author(s): Carter, J.

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Hidden Treasures: Conservation making natural science collections accessible

Julian Carter, Conservation Officer, Department of Biodiversity and Systematic Biology' National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF1 3NP

Museums are notorious for gathering material, which then remains 'lost' in stores and basements. The sight of cluttered boxes or overcrowded specimens crammed into a cupboard is far too common. As carers for collections, we are all faced with a balancing act of trying to prioritise which parts of our collections are looked after and worked upon in an attempt to make maximum use of the available resources. Words such as 'impact' and 'profile' are now commonly used to describe the value of a natural science collection. However, to decide on these factors you first need to know what is in a collection, and what condition is it in.

The first great challenge facing a conservator working in natural science is the great diversity of material that goes to make up our collections. From the large skeletal remains of cetaceans, to microscopic plankton, the conservator caring for this range of material must understand how it is prepared and preserved, its biological composition, and how best to store and access this material.

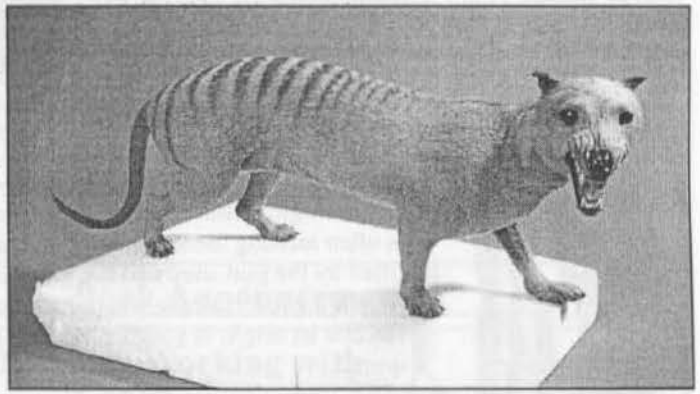
Many factors will drive the decision of how to direct collection care effort. This will range from the monetary value of a specimen or collection, to straightforward practical problems such as the space available to work on, and how to store collection material. Ultimately it is the perceived value of a specimen or collection that will drive collection care effort. Such a value will be derived from the scientific, historical and educational value of the material. However, such decisions cannot be made until the collection has been conserved, documented and curated, since until you know what specimens you have, how can you judge their value? Such decisions require the need to understand the type and origin of the material that is in your care, enabling sensible decision making on directing collection care.

The role of museum conservation in natural science collections can be put to great use in making 'lost' or 'degraded' collection material accessible to all facets of museum work. Conservation effort itself can range from a simple re-packing exercise, to detailed conservation treatments, all of which is aimed at stabilising the collection within its storage or display environment. The very act of conserving a

collection is often the first occasion the material has been fully assessed since its arrival in the museum, and can be combined with other projects such as compiling inventory information, thus improving accession documentation and recording conservation work.

Examples of how conservation work has improved collection access are numerous at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW), which is fortunate to have a team of conservators working in all collection areas. The examples that follow are from my own work and experiences on the zoological collections.

The NMGW's specimen of Tasmanian Wolf is an example of an extinct animal, and as a result was easy to justify spending conservation effort on even though the specimen possesses no real data. However, what value has a pile of crabs in boxes with no data? NMGW possesses a great deal of this type of collection material in poor storage conditions. However, this material has been put to good use over the past couple of years at NMGW. Specimens have been regularly used in both display and 'hands on' exhibits. Thus, the material may have little scientific value, but it has a great deal of *access value*, and proved to be worthy of conservation effort. With such collections, the work requires little more than re-packing and baseline documenting. Good packing is well worth the effort as it is the first line of defence, protecting the specimens from environmental problems in poor storage areas and pest attack.



The Tasmanian Wolf

The very process of working through a collection can establish the true value of material. Whilst rummaging for material for use in display in an old sub-basement area in NMGW, a specimen of swordfish was found. Originally thought to be a model, striping down the old filler and paint revealed the real fish to be present. X-rays also revealed the extent of the skeletal material present. The specimen has now been painted up and returned to display almost 90 years after being initially prepared.

NMGW possesses a great deal of old skeletal teaching material. Much of this material requires a good clean and some repair, but again this is proving to have great value in education and hands on use. Recent years have seen the skeletal collection repacked and an inventory put together. The result is that the material is available on a database and is now easily located. Recent exhibitions and gallery developments have been regularly using this material.

Use of bone material in a 'hands on' gallery

A large amount of low data entomological material exists in NMGW. Conserving this material and moving it into the collections proves useful. The specimens offer a source of material for 'access' based display projects. However, exercise care with old entomological collections as important material, which is often missing identification information, can be identified by the pins used and the methods of mounting. This is a good example where knowledge of the material and its origin in your institutions collections are required.

Pinned Coleoptera (Beetles)

Some collection areas are relatively easy to store and care for, and the material lends itself well to 'hands on' use. Molluscan shell collections are a good example of this as the material is generally robust and easy to handle. However other collections areas require much more care and thought in their use and handling. Fluid storage is an important means of preservation, but can be difficult to use in terms of display and 'hands on' access. The use of fluid collections is further complicated by health and safety issues. However fluid preserved specimens can be useful in the presentation of 'difficult' animal groups, especially soft bodied organisms. An example of a 'difficult' group of organisms is spiders, which normally are fluid preserved. NMGW has a collection representing about 70% of the British fauna, but the collection has no curatorial care. The collection has required extensive conservation work. A good result of this work has been the establishment of duplicate voucher specimens that have been utilised in a new 'hands on' gallery by mounting in clear resin blocks. The blocks are easy to handle and can be viewed through a video microscope.

Conservation work is also important in making collection material identifiable, and effectively accessible for scientific work. A good example is with work on neglected survey collections, which have had the main groups of interest removed, and then the rest of the collection has suffered from custodial neglect in a lost corner of a storeroom. Current issues such as local biodiversity issues and species distribution can lead to a reworking of such collection material. Conservation work can make this material accessible for further study and identification work.

Thus, collection conservation is much more than sticking bits of plastozote in boxes. Conservation, along with curation and documentation, plays an important role in collection care. It can be used to great effect in helping to utilise material by making it accessible for education, scientific study and display. Every Natural Science institution needs a conservator!

Book Announcement

Guidance on Working with Independent Conservators

The Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC) has published Working with Independent Conservators, Guidelines for good practice. These Guidelines will help museums and other organisations to appoint, brief and work with independent conservators. Working with Independent Conservators describes the stages in commissioning conservation work from an independent conservator. It deals with the remedial conservation of objects, collection condition surveys and various other types of projects, such as furniture restoration. It also contains information on the options for tendering and outlines the principles of good conservation practice.

Working with Independent Conservators is available from MGC Publications priced £8.00 plus £1.25 p&p (UK), £2.50 (EC) or £4.00 (outside EC). Cheques should be made payable to the Museums & Galleries Commission and orders should be sent to MGC Publications, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AA.