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Title: Training for Natural Science Conservators: A review of a 5 week course for Natural Science Conservators - Aims and Future Developments

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The Conservation of Natural History Materials Cambridge

This article describes a new course offered by the Geological Conservation Unit at the University of Cambridge. The following two articles are from students who both completed the course this year.

Training for Natural Science Conservators A review of a 5 week course of Natural Science Conservators - Aims and Future Developments

Very few training courses have been run to develop the skills of the Natural Science Conservator. Those that have been developed have been run mainly as short one-off courses and have concentrated on collections management issues rather than the conservation or materials science subjects required by the conservator.

In 1996 the Geological Conservation Unit offered a five week training course in the Conservation of Natural History Materials. The aim of the course was:

- To establish some form of general syllabus covering training in Natural Science Conservation.
- To develop a training course aimed at professionals (trained conservators or qualified natural science collection managers) who wish to develop their expertise in this field.
- To review the expertise available in the UK to lecture on this course.

Course Support and Development

The course was structured in a series of modules that covered aspects of natural history collection's conservation and designed as a basic introduction and review of the field. The course was also designed to run as one integrated unit.

The main lecturers for the five week course included conservators from the National Museum of Wales (to provide the organic conservation expertise

for the course), members of the Geological Conservation Unit, University of Cambridge, plus other experts in the field from separate institutions.

The course was also seen as a precursor to the development and running of an M.Phil. in the Conservation of Natural Science Materials at the Geological Conservation Unit (equivalent in content and duration to Durham's M.Sc. in Conservation and now available as a two year full-time qualification targeted at recently graduated students). Through running short courses such as this we were able to develop the syllabus for the longer courses and develop and assess the expertise available for training in the field.

Despite initial support (early indications were that we could have filled the course twice over), too few people by the cut-off date had registered to make it financially viable. The days of running courses at a financial loss are long gone!

Reasons that were given for not being able to attend the course included the cost, low grant-aid , and in particular the length of the course.

The major problems when running longer courses, such as the original five week course, is the cost of bringing a group of experts together and organising diaries so that all the relevant people are available for the course. Along with low numbers of students these problems prevented us from re-running the course in its original format.

Several people, who had already obtained grant-aid to attend the course however, requested that we investigate other ways in which we could run the training course. We recognised early on that a five week course was a long period of time for people to be away from work and looked at running the course on a more flexible basis and at the possibility of splitting the course up and hosting it in a group of museums.

Students would then go to the lecturers rather than the lecturers coming to the group of students! Training could then be worked into the lecturers' work programmes and would be undertaken using an agreed syllabus and training approach. This got us around the expense of bringing groups of lecturers together and meant that the course was available for any number

of students at any time during the year. The course could then more easily be split into individual modules that could be run independent of each other. However, we agreed that students could only complete the course successfully if all the modules were attended. Payment was a one-off fee.

Running the Course

The flexible modular course was initially organised to accommodate those students who had obtained grants to attend the original five week course in 1996. The syllabus remained the same, the only difference being that the course was run at three centres. This allowed us to work the training schedule (which is practically based) into our lecturers' work programs and gave the staff running the course a greater flexibility in the times they could take on students. It also allowed us to run the course for individuals or small numbers of students at a time suitable to both the student(s) and lecturer(s).

Since the first course was run we have had our museum professionals attend the course with another two wishing to attend in the future. Professionals attending the course have come from the UK and North America (no similar course is being run for natural science conservators in North America). The course is currently only being advertised by 'word of mouth.'

Currently the Geological Conservation Unit, the University of Cambridge, The National Museums and Galleries of Wales, and the Natural History Museum are hosting the course. Future museums will be added as course modules are developed and integrated with this 'basic training programme.'

A formal syllabus is available for students. This is however, flexible depending on the knowledge and skill base of each particular student.

Review of the Course

Students are encouraged to critically review the course, what they have achieved and to pinpoint failings in the course or the lecturers. A number of reviews of the course are available on request. These have so far been encouraging and constructive. The course is structured into five modules (each five days in duration) with a degree of flexibility built into each module dependant on the student(s) ability and knowledge base.

The modules cover the core areas of natural science conservation and materials.

Week 1	Introduction to Natural History Collections (including entomological and anthropology collections) Preventive conservation and management Health and Safety
Week 2	Inorganic materials (Preventive Conservation)
Week 3	Inorganic materials (Remedial Conservation) Environment Management
Week 4	Organic Materials (Botany Collections and Pest Control)
Week 5	Organic Materials (Zoological and associated materials)

Future Developments

5 weeks is not enough time to fully train a natural science conservator. No new jobs are being developed for natural science conservators; in fact we are losing posts. It is therefore important to provide on-training for those already in a position where care of a natural science collection is within their remit. We would like to expand the training course further adding modules onto it providing further specialisation in areas covered within the course. This would bring in and encourage other people who are working within the field to develop their levels of expertise. We are also looking to accredit the course through MTI and to bring in external assessors. This would further aid in the professional development of the course.

This will require three things:

- Institutional (and Professional) support
- Co-ordination by body(s)
- Accreditation/Recognition

Conclusion

The approach to and development of the course to date seems to have been relatively successful. This has not made us complacent and we feel that there is much more work to be done to improve it further. We feel that in

service training for museum professionals in relevant positions is the correct way to develop expertise in this field. The current employment situation for conservators, let alone natural science conservators, is difficult. We are losing good young conservators from the field because of the lack of funding for the field and the lack of available positions for natural science conservators. This style of professional training by accredited attachment may be the best way to develop expertise in the field and to also increase awareness among 'mainstream' conservators of the field and how knowledge of natural science materials should be an essential core knowledge for conservators.

Hopefully we will also be able to develop further modules around the course using expertise from other museums. The ultimate aim must be to develop a modularised training schedule for natural science conservation which will provide training and support throughout a natural science conservator's career and allow them to 'cross-over' into 'mainstream' conservation or management. A co-ordinated professional training program in the field is essential for the future growth of our field.

Contacting us...
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Reviews of the Course

This five-week course was organised by Chris Collins of The Geological Conservation Unit, Department of Earth Sciences, Cambridge University. It was held at three institutions (the above, The Botany Department at the Natural History Museum, London and The Botany, Geology and Zoology Departments at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales), all well known for their contributions to natural science conservation in the UK. In addition to myself, the course was only attended by one other individual, a situation that created a relaxed atmosphere and informal approach to tuition that included preparation and storage techniques as well as remedial treatments.

Some aspects of the curation of natural science collections were covered which helped to put into perspective the role of the conservator, balancing the needs of the collections with those of the curators and others using them.

Documentation was covered throughout the course with regard to surveys, condition and treatment reports and broader collection management issues such as loan procedures. There was a strong emphasis on preventive conservation which included environmental monitoring and control, pest management and storage materials. Various health and safety issues were discussed such as toxic and radioactive minerals, pesticides in botanical and entomological collections and arsenic in taxidermy specimens. Remedial treatments ranged from basic cleaning and repair to consolidation and other specialist treatments as for pyrite decay.

The content of this course was ideal for someone involved in the care of natural science collections. The trainers were very knowledgeable in both their own specialist areas and general conservation practices. It was an added bonus to meet the tutors in their working environment. Seeing other museums' storage facilities and how their staff approach the care of collections provoked many questions and discussions and, as there were only two students the topics covered could be adapted to suit our requirements and levels of knowledge.