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Progress can be painfully slow about implementing guidance, but here is just one example, with which I am familiar. From the perspective of one scientific society, responsible for very important data, the BSBI has begun to think these things through and put in place some actions of its own to help. It is re-visiting the question of herbaria – those deeply unfashionable collections of dried plants that so many museums over the last 50 years have quietly "lost". In 1983, the Society published the second edition of its listing of UK herbaria (the original was issued in 1958). Every collection worth the name in some form of institution was indexed. It is now re-examining these, and the evidence so far is that a considerable proportion of even those that had survived, moribund, until 1983 have since vanished, or been subsumed elsewhere. As for **active** curation, that is another matter still. How many local museums have anyone even faintly knowledgeable about the plants in their care? However, the BSBI is going to promote those herbaria that are still active. It is also working to produce clear guidance for anyone doing recording which species need to be supported by specimens, and on how to go about ensuring their survival. The likelihood is, therefore, that regional museums will be approached by more people about housing important collections. The Society is also working with existing active curators to help them get their collections properly documented – through an on-line documentation project involving its own members. Ultimately, though, the success of all this depends on the museums recognising they have a vital role to play, and seeking ways to support it.

So what are people doing about data quality? (2)

A final example can come from the world of biological recording organisations at the local level. Hampshire has one of the best local records centre set-ups in the country. It is not only VERY active, it also has a high level of staffing, a wide programme of survey, voluntary sector engagement, and gives biodiversity data support to all the relevant authorities in its large, very biodiverse area. In order for this to work, it has entered on a big programme of development – both in terms of who it is serving, as well as sorting out the infrastructure to do the work. Part of this has been to put in place a very wide-ranging, active partnership, both of voluntary sector organisations and statutory bodies. Among these, note that the Hampshire Museums Service is one. It means that the Museums Service has a stand-alone high profile as a vital part in the business of collecting and ensuring the quality of biodiversity data in the County.

It is early days for this partnership, but the signs are good that, at last, people outside museums are beginning to realise that biological collections are absolutely vital for biodiversity data support.

What are the benefits?

The benefits for biodiversity data collection and ultimately conservation are that we are acting on sound information, properly backed up by facts. But what are the benefits for museums and their collections? I believe they are potentially many, and only partially tapped by a few museums: a broadened base for potential financial support; engagement with communities of people who do not normally consider working with museums; hence a higher public profile in ways that challenge the usual public view of museums; which can then engender political support because museum collections are seen to have broader public benefits – meeting needs identified elsewhere, such as broader community engagement and sustainability. Ultimately this can only benefit museums themselves, by helping to ensure their future as an integrated part of community endeavour. This way museums guard against the inevitable disasters that can befall them, and especially highly vulnerable and ultimately irreplaceable natural science collections.

The EYE Project: Environmental Recording in the Museum Context

Naomi Hewitt, EYE Project Co-ordinator, Tyne & Wear Museums

Exploring Your Environment, or the EYE Project, is a three year, joint partnership project between Newcastle University and Tyne and Wear Museums. It aims to encourage people to think differently about the environment they live in through active involvement with biological and geological recording. At the same time, it aims to develop a regional bank of information about the biodiversity and geodiversity of the North East of England, in order to inform the future planning of the region's natural environment. It is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Northumbrian Water, Newcastle University, Tyne and Wear Museums and the North East Regional Museums Hub, Natural England, Northumberland Wildlife Trust and Tyne and Wear Museums Business Partners Fund.

The first aim of EYE is to increase public knowledge and understanding of biodiversity through environmental recording. As the project title suggests, EYE is about encouraging people to think about the environment around them by recording the animals and plants that they see, thus developing positive attitudes towards the natural world. The Project works closely with Newcastle University's Department of Civil Engi-

neering and Geosciences and Tyne and Wear Museum's ICT and Web Development team to develop a unique web site, which uses WikiTOID technology developed by the University. This will allow people over the whole region to record their sightings of species on a digital mapping system. Recording will be undertaken with reference to landscape features on a map rather than having to input detailed location descriptions or grid references. It will also be possible to search for species recorded over the entire region or indeed to a specified sub-regional or local level. At the same time, a mechanism to restrict access to detailed locality information for sensitive species has been incorporated. Central to the function of the website is the desire to foster an understanding of biodiversity and the changing nature of species and habitats, and the important role that recording plays in this.

The EYE Project extends throughout North East England, working with partners across the region from the Scottish border in the north to the southern boundary of the Tees Valley in the south. However, it is very firmly based within the Great North Museum, the working title of the current re-development of the Hancock Museum in Newcastle upon Tyne, led by Newcastle University. The museum is currently closed to the public for three years as it undergoes a £26 million transformation, made possible through a series of grants and funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Newcastle University, Newcastle City Council, ONE North East and the TyneWear Sub-Regional Partnership, the European Regional Development Fund, Northern Rock Foundation and numerous other trusts and foundations. This exciting new development will bring together three museums into one, combining the natural history collections of the Hancock Museum with Greek and Etruscan collections housed in the Shefton Museum, and the prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon collections of the Museum of Antiquities. A visit to the new museum will consist of an exploration of galleries with global significance, such as world biodiversity, geology and evolution, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and world cultures, but will also contain displays with a regional focus, particularly a central gallery devoted to Hadrian's Wall and another to the natural history of Northumbria. The EYE website will take a central place in the new museum, and be a key feature of the Northumbrian Natural History gallery when the museum re-opens in 2009.

The EYE Project plays a key part in the evolving function and purpose of the Hancock Museum. It reflects a shift towards the role of the museum visitor as an active contributor to the knowledge base, as well as allowing this information to be shaped virtually from outside the boundaries of the museum. The Hancock collections contain many historic specimens, some dating from a time when natural history collecting meant hunting live specimens to be subsequently mounted and preserved in a static display. However, despite this apparent conflict, the museum has always played an important role in making its audiences aware of the importance and fragility of the natural world. This has become even more important in today's society where views of the natural world continue to change and are greatly influenced by the conservation movement. The increase in leisure time for many people and improvements in transport provision have contributed to greater public access to the countryside. At the same time, the popularity of television programmes such as the BBC's Springwatch, Autumnwatch and Planet Earth have raised awareness of the natural environment as a living, fluid ecosystem. These changes have implications for the role and purpose of a natural history museum, as growing emphasis is placed on collecting information about the natural world as well as specimens.

In addition to the website, a further objective of the programme is to provide opportunities for people to get involved in recording, data collection and to find out more about species, habitats and identification techniques. The Project runs a regular events programme with activities for both adults and children held in a variety of locations around the region, including museums, parks, and nature reserves. These have included a nest box day, animal tracks and signs investigation, wild flower trails, and amphibian and pond exploration workshops. Activities focusing on particularly high-profile species such as red kites, recently reintroduced to the North East, allow people to gain an in-depth understanding of the lifestyle and behaviour of one type of animal but also provide opportunities for learning about other species and how to record information about them. School workshops, an annual fair and an annual public survey, are further examples of different ways in which a varied events programme engages with the community, to increase knowledge of the natural world through recording. Spring 2007 saw the launch of the first EYE annual survey, the *Northumbrian Water Wild Flowers on your Doorstep Survey*, designed to encourage people to record twelve common wild flower species which are indicators of rich wild flower grassland.

The second aim of the EYE Project is to collate and manage biological and geological records from disparate datasets. Records in the region are held by a large number of organisations and individuals. These include the three regional wildlife trusts, Natural England and the Environment Agency, as well as a number

of specialist interest organisations such as the Natural History Society of Northumbria, who own the Hancock Museum and its collections. There are also extensive records generated through numerous regional and national recording projects. EYE is working to locate other, hidden sources, such as the vast array of historical information which is bound up with museum collections and archives. This information will be collected, managed, and fed into the database. The North East Regional Environmental Data Hub will provide an information resource which can be drawn on by a variety of organisations and individuals. These include professionals working in the field of biodiversity and conservation, planners and ecological consultancies, specialist groups and individuals as well as museum curatorial and learning staff. The latter will, in particular, be able to use this resource for the development of permanent and temporary exhibitions with a regional natural history focus. Appropriate records from the Data Hub will also be available on the EYE Project website.

The core of the Data Hub is a database that was built up from the 1970s to the late 1990s, originally accumulated as part of the North East Environmental Records Centre, housed within Sunderland Museum and latterly the Hancock Museum in Newcastle. This is a substantial database of about half a million records, but due to changing curatorial roles, very few records have been added to it over the past six years. This database is drawn on by conservationists and planners when responding to building developments, so it is essential that this is kept up to date to reflect the changing nature of species and habitats.

A volunteer programme commenced in January 2007, and through this the Project has recruited a task force of 36 volunteers who have undertaken a number of roles, including entering paper records into the Data Hub, archive research and gaining practical field recording skills. This has been another way of getting people involved both with the Project and the wider recording community, as well as creating an extensive bank of new records for the Data Hub.

The EYE Project is a new, exciting and challenging way to extend the role of the Hancock Museum and to enhance the strong links between the museum, the region and the wider environment. It demonstrates that museums are well placed not only to be institutions which hold information about the world, but that they can increasingly be vehicles for encouraging people to become more actively engaged with the environment around them and to contribute to this knowledge base themselves.

To find out more about the EYE Project, see the temporary website at www.eyeproject.org.uk or contact: Naomi Hewitt: EYE Project Co-ordinator, naomi.hewitt@ncl.ac.uk