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Report on the NatSCA Conference at Glasgow – 15th-16th May 2008

Claire Sturman, Natural Science Officer at Portsmouth City Museums and Records Office

This is a summary of the eight talks and the tours that took place at the NatSCA conference. They were all enjoyable and showed a selection of many different partnerships that museums can be part of. They gave me something to think about and new ways of promoting the museum I work at, particularly the natural history collections.

I travelled up to Glasgow on the Wednesday and found the B&B rather quickly – it was only 1 minute from the Kelvinbridge tube stop. I made myself comfortable then went off to find the Zoology Museum ready for Thursday morning.

After registration and being issued with the conference pack and name badge, it was the welcome by Mr Ewen Smith, the Director of the Hunterian Museum. We then settled down for the first presentation of the day. Alec Coles from Tyne and Wear Museums gave a talk on the new Great North Museum to be opened early 2009. It is in the old Hancock Museum and incorporates the Museum of Antiquities, Shefton Museum and the Hatton Gallery. It hopes to renew an interest in Natural Science and archaeology in the North East region. It wants to be able to put a view of the whole world in one place and for it to be a “gateway to the landscape”. Partners on the project include University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Natural History Society of Northumbria, Society of Antiquities of Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear Museums and Newcastle City Council.

The project sounded exciting with the combining of all the museums into one area. Much consultation took place with visitor groups such as disabled and other focus groups. Each stage was signed off once completed and only one person had full control. This would help the project move forward and ensure nothing was missed along the way. Also by only having one person sign things, the standards and ideas were consistent throughout. This sounded a simple yet effective way of making the partnership works.

The second presentation was by PC Sally Smart. She gave an interesting lecture on the work of a Wildlife Liaison Officer in West Yorkshire and her responsibilities in training and coordination of the other Officers within the Division. She has made contacts and partnerships with many different organisations including museums, bird of prey training, gamekeepers, wildlife groups and Customs and Excise. The Police work in partnership with volunteer wildlife groups by sharing skills and data. For example, the Police use their rope access skills to retrieve chicks from birds of prey nests. The wildlife groups have the expertise in handling chicks to take DNA samples from them and complete the records. The two groups then share the DNA data to help protect the birds from poachers and to detect nest tampering.

The Wildlife Liaisons attend roadshows to bring the issue of Wildlife Crime to the public. They do this in partnership with museums (who lend them articles for display) and other organisations that wish to be promoted.

The biggest partnership the Wildlife Liaisons hold is with Museums. The Museums can provide training venues, object handling and identification skills. They also help with identification in raids and for members of the public. I enjoyed the talk, as it was an area I had not explored myself, and will now think more about how the museum I work in could work with outside organisations

Dr Gill Stevens is the Head of UK Biodiversity at the NHM, the speaker of the third talk on the partnerships between amateur-expert groups and the scientific community, and how the NHM acts as a link between the two. They came about from the need to collect data from the environment and as a way to unlock the data held by the amateur-expert groups across the country. One such project using this partnership model was ElmMap. It was aimed at mapping the survivors from the Dutch Elm disease by using rambler groups trained in the skills to record and identify the trees found on their walks.

Dr Stevens pointed out that such projects only work well when there are shared goals and good will is nurtured from the beginning. Clear ownership of the project is essential so that the correct acknowledgement is given. Scientific underpinning is also vital to give trust and authority to the groups bringing in data. An interesting point that was made was the role of the Social Scientist – they are invaluable in helping groups work together and giving advice on mediation.

The other partner that Dr Stevens talked of was the general public, but getting them involved in the same way as the amateur-expert groups was trickier. Lessons were learnt from a bluebell survey done several years before. When it was re-launched, the scientific and public explanations were simplified and the project was a success. By giving clear scientific purpose to the project, people are more willing to get involved as they can see how they are contributing. Another project was the Open Air Lab Network (OPAL) to encourage the next generation of naturalists and environmentalists, aimed at encouraging people to meet real scientists and to study, enjoy and protect their local environment

The final talk of the day was given by Kate Andrew, the Principal Heritage Officer from Hereford Museums. The presentation was on the new stores that were designed and installed by Ocean Design. Whilst not a partnership in the same manner as the previous talks, it highlighted the need for consultation with designers. One aspect that had to be included was the need for open storage as the store had Open Days throughout the year. Two rows were chosen to have glass-fronted cupboards and glass-topped drawers at wheelchair height. They had to be accessible to the curators as the contents were changed depending on the day's theme. One idea I will be using in the future is the fixture of magnets to the bottom of mounted birds so they are held in place on the metal shelving – easily accessible but without having them slip around.

In the afternoon, I went on the Zoology and Thurso Street stores tours. It was intriguing to hear how curators have hardly touched the Hunterian Collection. Even when moved to new drawers, the specimens were photographed and put back in exactly the same order. Geoff Hancock showed us the collection of old collection boxes. I liked the ones disguised as books, yet the "titles" gave them away. The King collection showed a glimpse into the collector himself – he worked in an art collage (lots of pencil boxes) and had a love of cigars! We were then allowed to have a wander around to explore for ourselves, peering into cupboards and drawers. The Thurso Street stores, which held the geology and ethnographic collections, proved to be ideal conditions despite its location (between a garage and flour mill) due to the thickness of the walls keeping the temperature relatively steady. The Hunterian deals with bulk entries by assigning a HUG number (Hunterian Un-catalogued Group), but no individual numbers are given out. This fulfils accreditation and at a later date, individual numbers can be given. The highlight of the tour was being allowed a glimpse of the mineral proustite. The rare mineral is very sensitive to light, starting as a ruby red colour, then fading to dull grey – this specimen was still ruby.

Friday 16th May 2008

After the welcome by Alison Reid, the Visitor Service Manager to the Kelvingrove Museum and their new facilities, Andy Lee gave the first talk of the day from NHM. Andy is the Project Manager for Real World Science, a partnership between NHM, OUNHM, Manchester Museum and the Hancock Museum, which began in April 2004. The aim of Real World Science is making science relevant to secondary schools and to promote it as a career choice. It also aimed to give basic science to those choosing not to follow it after GCSE's. After consulting with schools it was revealed that the priority was to give more support to those teaching science subjects at KS3 and KS4. It was also felt that more should be done to highlight the differences between museum and school learning styles by offering formats not found in the classroom. Partnerships with people who have experience of secondary teaching were also created. Changes in the National Curriculum, such as the provision more school trips and the inclusion of 5 hours of culture into the week have helped museums get schools in. By working with the schools, many of barriers surrounding school trips have been removed or reduced.

The Projects is down to the amount of promotion and the addition on online resources. The MLA has begun to encourage student teachers to take placements within museums to let them see what a great resource they are and to encourage future visits. This is still mainly being done with primary schools, but it is hoping to attract more secondary schools. The Real World Science Project receives continuous feedback to help it expand and keep up with needs. It hopes to include more sites in the future, reaching into all areas of the country.

The second talk was given by Naila Akram from the RSPB. A partnership was formed between the Kelvingrove Museum and the RSPB to educate people about the environment around them. It was astonishing to hear that people thought the blue tit was an African bird and were surprised to learn they could attract it to their own gardens! The park near the Museum has plenty of wildlife to offer; from cormorants to otters. The Glasgow City Council, Park Rangers and the Department for Culture and Sport in Glasgow have supported

the partnership. Funding has come from the HLF, Scottish National Heritage and by providing lots of muffins! New staff have been employed to specifically work at the Museum with the aim to introduce a balance between the formal teaching of the interpretation and schools with the informal of people having a chat on their days out. Volunteers also help the staff in these roles.

To compete with the shops to get visitors interested, smaller projects were added to the programme and the most successful was the blue-tit webcam whose images were added to the website. The Staff also offered guided tours of the Museum, combining the Museum collection with the wildlife of today allowing people a close up view of the creatures they could expect to find. Guided walks around the park help people to appreciate the landscape and wildlife, and also get the communities involve. It would also have the effect of getting people out to the nature reserves near the city and vice versa.

As with all projects there were hurdles to overcome. The main one was the difference in approaches to bureaucracy, procedures and deadlines within the various partners. The other was convincing the RSPB to allow the use of stuffed animals. By explaining only those from reputable sources were to be used and that it will help people help future creatures not end up in that state they became convinced.

Jo Mould, Development Manager from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), presented the third talk. She talked the BTCV apprenticeship scheme in environmental volunteering. A skills gap has been recognised in the environment sector as many of the existing work force are approaching retirement age and there are no replacements coming forward. The Apprenticeship scheme works by providing placements with partnership museums and other organisations. Each successful applicant is given a bursary, a mentor and sometimes a specialist too. A development programme is devised which can also include conferences and workshops alongside the normal training. With the demand for specialist, not generalists, being high the programme gives the Apprentices focused training in the chosen field. The roles of BTCV and the partnership organisation are clear from the start, which helps contribute to the success. BTCV provides the money, the apprentices through advertising and interviews, additional conferences and workshops and also advice on how to construct the programmes. The partnership organisation gives the apprentice the practical experience, daily supervision and the direction of the work.

At the end of the programme emerges a fully experienced and accredited Apprentice ready to take on the chosen subject. The hope of BTVC is to keep them within Scotland and Northern Ireland where the scheme is being piloted and funded, but they realise they can't stop them. BTCV hopes the scheme can be extended to England and Wales and is looking for organisations willing to take on apprentices. I thought the scheme sounded a great way to train the environmentalists of the future and would suit graduates and also those wanting a career change. By working with museums, the apprentices will also gain curation of collections, documentation and identification skills not found elsewhere.

The final talk of the day was given by Dr Patricia Lee from the University of Swansea. This was a fascinating talk on the use of DNA to determine bird species. It was delivered well, and even I could understand the science behind it all. A technique has been developed to determine the DNA of birds from eggshells and feathers. An example was given from the mis-identification of British Sparrow hawks. The male and female birds have obvious differences in size, but the complete bird is needed to see this. DNA can help to re-label birds that may need conformation.

The University of Swansea has been working with collections as far back as 1850's. They have found that small samples work better and the *primer* used depends on the age of the specimen. It is hoped to create a bank of DNA barcodes of the many species but no one can decide which segment to use. The sample is taken from the membrane inside the egg, leaving the shell untouched and using a hole already present from blowing. The technique is still destructive, but the overall appearance of the egg is not affected.

This was an interesting talk on how museums can be part of a greater partnership with science. They are stores of information, much of which is not available in the wild any more or not easily accessible. By using museum collections, costs to institutions are greatly reduced as there are no fieldwork fees – all the samples and data are already collected. Museums also receive the benefit of having the collections scientifically checked for species and the unidentified finally being named so their records are updated.

In the afternoon I joined the trip to Fossil Grove. This is a site in Victoria Park where several fossil tree stumps were uncovered landscaping of the park. Their significance was noted and a structure was built to

preserve them. The roof has been replaced since, but the rest of the building still stands. The site is run by a partnership of UKRIGS (Strathclyde Group), Glasgow City Council, Scottish National Heritage and Geological Society of Glasgow. There are interpretation boards in the building and plans to update the structure.

On Saturday I went with others to brave the midges at the Universities Field Centre near Loch Lomond. They have purpose built centre, and I was surprised to hear that the rooms planned for the new building included en-suite rooms for the students! I don't remember having anything like that on my field trips.

I really enjoyed the whole conference. It was good to hear about the different experiences of partnerships from a variety of speakers. I also feel more confident about forming partnerships, and what makes them work successfully, but also how to work with any problems that can occur. I also enjoyed meeting other curators with Natural History and swapping stories and believe that events such as this one are great places to make new friends and contacts within the field.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to all those that organised and gave presentations at the Conference for a superb event. Also thank you for providing the bursary that enabled me to attend – it was certainly worthwhile.

New Professionals Conference—Liverpool. October 7th 2008

It is our pleasure to invite you to attend the **New Professionals Conference (NPC)** organised by Bournemouth University and National Museums Liverpool. This one-day museums conference will focus on the experiences of students and new museum professionals, as well as highlighting current research and topical issues in museology. The Conference will take place at the **Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool on October 7th, 2008.**

The aim of the NPC is, first and foremost, to provide a platform for students and new professionals in the field of museums to share their research. The day will afford the opportunity for networking with fellow museum professionals and academics as well as current students and graduates.

The NPC is unique to the museums sector. Currently, there are no other symposia, conferences or colloquia that give museologists from across the UK, or internationally, the opportunity to come together and present research or professional practice and understanding. So with this in mind, we strongly encourage students and new professionals to consider submitting abstracts for presentations. The NPC is an excellent forum to present and demonstrate findings, methods, and approaches that have proven successful.

Also, if you would like to attend without giving a paper or poster presentation, please register at the website above by going to the 'How to register' page. The cost of registration has been generously subsidised by National Museums Liverpool to encourage as many budding museologists to attend as possible!

If you have any further queries about the Conference or submissions and registration, please contact Hannah Paddon at: npcenquiries@bournemouth.ac.uk

We look forward to seeing you there!

Conference Organiser: Hannah Paddon

Programme Leader, Bournemouth University: Yvette Staelens

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