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Taxidermy in Museums...is it dead?

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I have always been fascinated by Natural History and archaeology and attempted to combine both interests in my undergraduate dissertation *Analysis of the Ichthyological Remains from Garumelé, in the Medieval Sahel (900-1600 AD)* (awaiting publication) which was based on the material excavated by Dr. Haour in 2005 in Niger. Although this was a very challenging piece of work, in that I had to create my own photographic reference collection, due to a lack of material on the subject, and prepare some of my own specimens, it was incredibly rewarding and spurred my enthusiasm for faunal osteology (Fig 1.).

This encouraged me to enrol on the Museum Studies course at Newcastle University, in the hope of taking the Natural Sciences module. Throughout the course of this module I worked closely with the Natural History Society of Northumbria and the Hancock Museum and was fortunate enough to be allocated an incredible specimen in the form of an albatross which I was to actively research and conserve in preparation for its display in the new biology gallery in the Great North Museum (GNM).

Whilst working on the specimen I attended a Taxidermy Training Day hosted by Les Jessop at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens. This, in addition to various museum outings, inspired me to explore possible research questions for my dissertation that were taxidermy related.

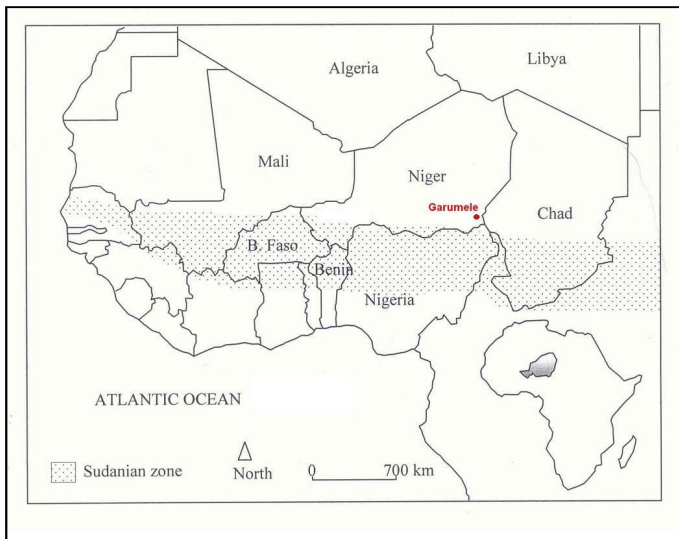


Fig 1. Map showing Garumelé, in Northern Africa.

After careful deliberation I narrowed the aim to the issues surrounding the open display of taxidermy in museums. It has become a popular choice for many museums through the UK and continental Europe and the impact that open display has on an individual is more intense than that which is gained when viewing a specimen from behind a glass barrier. The individual is free to get up close, explore it from all angles and get a sense of perspective. It's a personal interaction and above all it's memorable. However, there are issues which occur with open display and it is these problems that I hope to discuss in my post graduate dissertation; *Taxidermy in museums...is it dead?* The research aim is to investigate the potential conservational problems which occur when taxidermy specimens are placed on open display.

The paper will address the history of taxidermy and its display in museums (Fig 2.). Potential conservation issues surrounding the control of relative humidity, light, pests and dust, on openly displayed specimens, shall be the main focus of the paper and the plausibility of maintaining a constant supply of replaceable specimens will be addressed i.e. will the supply meet the demand when specimens begin to look worn? Do museums budget for the replacement of specimens? Are there enough taxidermists employed by museums today?



Fig 2. A stuffed albertros.

The NatSCA conference provided an excellent opportunity for me to research these issues. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, allows the public a lot of access to their collections and it was interesting to see how the museum has overcome some of the initial teething problems of their new £27.9 million refurbishment; i.e. finding the balance between accessibility and protecting specimens by introducing a minimum distance of just over an arms length between the specimen and the visitor (Fig 3.).

I hope to use the knowledge I gained from this year's conference as a foundation from which I can tailor my research towards other museums and their practices with regard to the open display of taxidermy.

If anyone has any thoughts, or contributions to my research, please get in touch!



Fig 3. The 'stampeed' at Kelvingrove Museum. Displaying these large mounted animals in one of the main galleries allows people to see the real size and the detail of the specimens

Pest Management in Practice – 2008 - 10th December 2008
Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow



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It is now 6 years since the pioneering conference "2001 - A pest odyssey" held at the British Library. Many of the new developments in IPM, which were first aired or discussed at that meeting, have now been put in to practice. Others have been refined or maybe even overtaken by changes in practice. At the ICON "Pest Management in Practice" meeting, held at the Imperial War Museum in 2007, we heard the experiences of those who have implemented IPM in many different collections since 2001. We also found out which are the most effective treatments to use for treating collections and how well they work in practice. Promoting the value of IPM to the many small museums and houses by training and sharing experiences was also shown to be very successful.

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