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There will be an interactive 'discovery centre', enhanced public facilities and three things that the old Hancock never had: a comfortable (!) lecture theatre, a well-designed education suite and a dedicated temporary exhibitions space.

The project has been generously funded by, amongst others, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, One North East's Single Programme, the Tyne & Wear Sub-regional Partnership and the Northern Rock Foundation. Seed funding has been provided by Newcastle University and Newcastle City Council.

Explore Your Environment (EYE)

Concurrently, thanks to funding from Heritage Lottery Fund and Northumbrian Water, we have reinvigorated a moribund environmental database to create a truly interactive public participation project. The EYE website (<http://www.eyeproject.org.uk/>) uses wiki technology, combined with interactive Ordnance Survey mapping and Google Earth to allow the remote entry of environmental data by anyone who registers with the site.

In addition, a major programme of environmental education events has been developed to stimulate interest in the project. This is a powerful partnership with Newcastle University, Natural England and Northumberland Wildlife Trust.

The EYE project and its development are inextricably linked with the ethos and development of the Great North Museum.

The Future...

I still believe that museum natural sciences face serious challenges both now and in the future. There is a dearth of new natural science curators and conservators being either trained or employed. There are relatively few natural science displays being developed and there is a real danger of our sector losing interest in the natural sciences, which is ironic given the ever-increasing public interest in the natural world as demonstrated by the popularity of media-based natural sciences experiences such as Springwatch.

Meanwhile, museum-based environmental recording is hardly thriving as budgets for such activity diminish and the hard truth about impossible financial models dawns.

It is in this context that projects like the Great North Museum, the EYE project and the Hub's curatorial needs work in the natural sciences become so significant. Of course, they address long-standing issues of collections management, building fatigue and under-used databases. More significantly, however, they will create superb new visitor experiences, encourage public engagement, provide research linkages with higher education, and will contribute to environmental understanding, health and sustainability.

So, in what are undeniably difficult times for the natural sciences in English museums, we can point to unprecedented investment in this area in North East England. This investment has been secured on the basis of the heritage merit and research potential of the collections, on the degree of public participation planned, and on a demonstrable contribution to the regional tourism economy.

Huge investment; demonstrable public support and enthusiasm; identifiable research potential; recognition of the social, economic and environmental value of our collections: perhaps the future for the natural sciences in our museums is brighter than we thought...

Wildlife Crime Unit, West Yorkshire Police

Sally Smart, Force Wildlife Officer, West Yorkshire Police

I was delighted to be asked to speak on Partnership Working by NatSca as my experience in working with Clare at Leeds has and is invaluable. Although I have the role here with West Yorkshire Police as Force Wildlife Officer, my expertise is with the enforcement of wildlife legislation, the gathering of evidence and liaising with CPS and I believe that I can accomplish this from my training over the years as a police officer.

However, though I feel confident and knowledgeable with the Law, I know that with some wildlife issues I need to work with experts. People who are able to identify species, who have knowledge about their subject, who can advise on the condition, best practice, habitat, housing the list is endless and Clare has been able to offer advice on many occasions, and was a real asset on a raid the Wildlife Crime Unit carried out in connection with endangered species being sold via the internet.

This partnership also developed when I set up a CITES training day. Clare was able to provide an excellent venue for a 'hands on' look at some of the endangered species we had talked about before hand. The partners who attended were able to see first hand just what an excellent resource the museum was and I know from feedback just how valuable everyone found this partnership working.

The conference was an excellent opportunity for me to explain how I need your support and how happy I am to support you all and to show partnership working is undoubtedly the way to go, to provide the expertise and knowledge we need to get the message across and move forward.

I am also delighted to say that as a result of the conference I now have two bookings for talks at Castle Cliffe, Bradford - thanks Gerry!!

'Making progress through partnership – examples of public engagement with science through the creation of novel networks'

Dr Gill Stevens, Head of UK Biodiversity, The Natural History Museum (Contact: G.Stevens@nhm.ac.uk)

We are living in a time when environmental issues are high on the public agenda and we as scientists and the science-based institutions have a critical and unique role to play in building a scientifically literate public. If we are to take full advantage of the opportunities for improving the quality of life offered by scientific knowledge and discovery, it is crucial that we bring scientists and the public closer together in a constructive dialogue to explore issues such as the quality of local environments.

Due to the special situation afforded to institutions such as the Natural History Museum, as both a collections-based research institute and a major visitor attraction, the 'museum community' has many opportunities to be involved and indeed lead public engagement activities. These include public surveys of charismatic species, development of publicly accessible identification guides, providing training and speaking to our visiting publics.

In this article, I share with you just a few practical examples of projects that have successfully 'extended the reach' of the institution in which I work in and how this work has integrated, or will be looking to integrate, the expertise of both professional and non-professionals in the search to 'know nature'.

I will introduce several examples of these initiatives which have involved experimenting with new ways of engaging the knowledge and enthusiasm of a wide variety of actors in nature and how fostering interaction at the science-society interface has helped new audiences better understand the world we live in.

Over the last 10 years, the Natural History Museum has been spear-heading a programme of research and associated activities focusing on UK Biodiversity; documenting, understanding and very importantly, communicating to a wide variety of audiences, the interest and relevance of our subject. This has been a gradual journey and has proved to be a rich learning experience for all involved. It has meant taking experimental approaches and adjusting our motivation and ambition along the way.

The experiment began on a fairly small scale and initially focused on very specific publics – the amateur experts – the national schemes and societies and voluntary groups where we had a common interest. The original drivers behind this work were rooted in conservation policy, when there was a clear recognition by the statutory agencies for conservation that the biodiversity knowledge needed to feed the BAP process, was embedded within the amateur community, a domain that they had hitherto largely neglected.

This is when we began working to rebuild the relationship between these two communities, taking on the role of 'honest broker' in a variety of partnership projects. A few examples of which are given here.