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**Proposal on the development of a web-based Decision Making Model for the conservation and restoration of fluid preserved specimens**

**- A.J. van Dam, Leiden Museum of Anatomy**

**ORGANIZATION**

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is an international non-profit organization, which is 'committed to the conservation, continuation, and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible'.

ICOM-CC is the largest of 25 International Committees of which ICOM is constituted. It is concerned with preservation, conservation and restoration of natural and cultural heritage. ICOM-CC consists of a variety of specialist Working Groups.

ICOM-CC's Natural History Collections Working Group (NHCWG) has approximately 150 members in more than 50 different countries. Due to election a new coordinator and assistant coordinator during ICOM's last triennial meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2002), the Working Group is functioning as it never did before.

Based on a discussion attended by more than 80 members, an ambitious program for the next triennial period (2002-2005) has been outlined during the Working Group's meeting in Rio.

The NHCWG recognizes that loss of conservation skills, serious gaps in conservation research, and lack of training is a concern in most countries in the world. By assimilating knowledge through the expertise of natural history conservators, knowledge loss and knowledge gaps can effectively and efficiently be dealt with.

**ACTIVITIES and their IMPORTANCE & RELEVANCE**

According to the NHCWG, the development of a web-based 'Conservation Expertise Network' and a 'Mobile Conservation Skills Lab' could be useful instruments in order to prevent the loss of skills in natural history collections conservation and to promote the sharing of conservation knowledge.

By creating a Mobile Conservation Skills Lab the Working Group aims at transferring knowledge and skills by international project-based training programs. When conservation knowledge and skills are lacking somewhere, a specific training program in the form of a workshop will be developed.

The proposed Conservation Expertise Network, to which the Mobile Conservation Skills Lab should be complementary, will be a web-based decision making model. It will serve as a (self-)educational, practical instrument designed to upgrade conservation knowledge and ethics, and should consequently lead to the development of conservation protocols that suit specific local situations.

Although the NHCWG eventually aims at realizing a Conservation Expertise Network covering various disciplines within natural history collections conservation, it realizes that a pilot project on one specific aspect of conservation should be performed. Therefore, the NHCWG would like to apply for a Conservation Education and Training Grant to perform this pilot project.

The proposed pilot project is focused on conservation and restoration of fluid preserved specimens. Of all disciplines within natural history collections conservation, this extremely specialist one is most profoundly subject to lack and loss of knowledge and skills.

The Working Group's web-based decision making model for the conservation and restoration of fluid preserved specimens will build upon the 'Decision making model for the conservation and restoration of modern art' developed by the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (1999). The model serves as a guideline through all aspects that need to be considered before making a decision about conservation of an object. It consists of a series of steps that lead to the formulation of a sound advice for treatment of the object based on the meaning and the condition of the object. The decision-making model forms the backbone of the Conservation Expertise Network. To it will be

linked all kinds of available information and a database of specialists in natural history conservation.

This web-based decision making model for the development of which the Getty's support is being requested, will serve as a pilot-project by testing the feasibility and will stimulate the further development of an integral Conservation Expertise Network. It will be invaluable as a source of much-asked knowledge and skills that we otherwise lose.

The results of this proposed pilot project should be presented at ICOM's next triennial meeting (The Hague, September 2005).

**INVOLVED INDIVIDUALS & INSTITUTIONS**

Andries J. van Dam will be the person mostly involved with the proposed project. Being conservator of the Leiden Museum of Anatomy, Van Dam has developed a broad expertise on conservation of fluid preserved specimens. He has published numerous articles on this subject, has given many lectures both in the Netherlands and abroad and has investigated new methods and materials for conservation, for instance in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. In 2002, he was elected coordinator of ICOM-CC's Natural History Collections Working Group.

Van Dam will bring together the most recent knowledge on conservation of fluid preserved specimens in close cooperation with experienced colleagues and relevant institutions like ICN, NHCWG, ICCROM, CCI etc.

Victoria Purewal, botanical conservator of the National Museum and Gallery of Wales and assistant coordinator of the NHCWG, will edit the results of Van Dam's activities.

Agnes Brokerhof will be involved as project advisor. Brokerhof is senior conservation scientist at ICN (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage) and well known for investigating techniques, materials and procedures for conservation, both remedial and preventive. She has experience with the application of the 'decision making model' in the conservation of both natural history and ethnographic collections.

Coordinator of the proposed project will be Babke Aarts, who is currently employed by the Dutch Academic Heritage Foundation. She coordinates both local and national projects on selection, conservation and digitization of natural history collections.

If the proposed project will take place, three programmers and designers will be invited to present their proposals for the web-related part of the project. They should both be skilled in developing heritage-related and educational websites.

Preliminary developmental work has shown that the decision-making model and associated ideas can be transformed to an interactive computer based program.

