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- Change from Halon in non-wetting fire extinguishing systems to use of inert gas (*Inergen*).
- ArtSorb can be recycled by microwaving on full power for 1.5 minutes
- Pyrite decay acids on geological specimens are neutralised by ammonia vapour using polyethylene glycol 400 as a suspension base, and bulky poly-hydrate salts are dehydrated by the process.
- A split-V pen can be used as a spot-focusing device for ultrasonic cleaning.
- MODOSTUC putty can be used as a neutral gap-fill for palaeontology specimens.
- Jesmonite resin can be effectively used for making rubber moulding jackets for casting.
- Stereo-lithography is useful to enlarge or reduce castings.
- *Smooth-On Smooth Cast 300Q* is useful as an easy-pour and fine-grained casting resin.
- The Darwin 1 building maintains a cool atmosphere just below the flash-point of IMS to eliminate spark-ignition risk.
- Darwin 2 will be cooled to 17°C (lower at night) and maintained at 45% RH to lower the risk of pest infestation.

The NatSCA Sessions - Wednesday 15th: A Personal View

- Maggie Reilly

Having left Glasgow on the Easyjet red-eye at 6.00 am on Tuesday morning, I was a little bleary shuffling thro' Stansted at the other end. However by the time I got to Cromwell Rd, the sight of the utterly magnificent edifice of the NHM lifted my spirits. I found the cheery efficient welcoming team on the registration desk and launched myself into the whirlwind of this special anniversary conference. I am reporting on the NatSCA sessions of the conference and these took place on the Wednesday afternoon. I must say that, as ever, I enjoyed the departmental tours in the morning – after all who doesn't like a good snoop in other people's cupboards..... Despite numerous business visits to NHM in recent times I had never managed a tour of the Darwin Centre so was pleased to do that and mightily impressed with the new tank room for large specimens. A recently acquired giant squid in the process of being preserved was lurking in a poly-thene tent and apparently is destined for storage in a specially made massive glass tank. Damien Hirst, eat your heart out!

On to the Special Collections Department of the Library where some of its treasures were laid out for our delight - beautifully illustrated books, drawings and prints. The drawings made by the Scottish artist Sydney Parkinson on Captain Cook's first voyage of discovery to the South Seas had special resonance as we have specimens associated with the Cook voyages in the Hunterian in Glasgow and we are much steeped in the history of the voyages.

The lecture sessions were got off to an optimistic start with Nick Gordon reporting on the recent successful Subject Specialist Network bid to support and further develop existing natural sciences specialist networks. Nick emphasised that SSN's had to deliver a product that was of benefit to audiences but those audiences could be not only the public but might be academic researchers or other curators. Collections and people who use them are the key to this. Nick recommended to those that haven't already done so, read the MLA's 'Inspiring Learning for All' to understand more of the framework in which successful networks will operate.

The introduction of institution wide collections management standards and policies in a multidisciplinary museum potentially could restrict the use of natural science collections where there are time-honoured and useful practices peculiar to the nature of these collections e.g. we lend to non-museum borrowers or permit (even encourage) long term research loans. Anne Fahy and Donna Young of National Museums of Liverpool spoke about formulating their collections management policy and meeting the needs of natural science collections. Close collaboration between curators, conservators and registrars is necessary. In a smaller multidisciplinary museum such as my own where we have no registrar or specialist conservators, we found wide consultation with all our curatorial and technical staff to be essential.

Members may be familiar with the 'ten agents of deterioration' risk analysis technique and Kate Andrew described the application of this technique to the development of two new collection stores in Ludlow and Hereford. It was extremely useful to hear about these case studies where practical examples of the risks posed to collections by light, pests, flood, fire and the other agents were worked though and pragmatic and cost-effective means of mitigating the risks sought.

Louise Bacon from the Horniman discussed the challenges they face in refurbishing galleries whilst having to retain old style listed showcases. The showcases were well made but have problems with dust ingress, lighting and humidity control. A variety of relatively straightforward measures (replacing seals, re-puttying glass, moving lighting outside cases, use of Artsorb to help control humidity) help solve some of the problems to acceptable modern standards and allow the refurbishment to progress.

Doug Russell from the NHM looked at the development of standards to the acquisition and management of bird egg collections today. The collecting of birds eggs is rightly restricted by a number of national and international laws. However for scientific research some collection of modern eggs is necessary. He debated the pros and cons of the three methods available for legal acquisition of modern egg specimens - seizure of illegal collections, specimens taken under licence and captive bred specimens. This realises some useful material but has limitations – a truly representative time series is unlikely to result. The ethical framework in which more scientifically significant egg collecting might take place is still to be formulated. Doug also raised the issue of how much egg collection data should be made widely available especially in these days of on-line catalogues. There is a tension between improving access to collections and revealing sensitive data (distribution/ nest sites/breeding data) which may be misused. Again there is a need for discussion and establishment of national guidelines. A guiding principle has to be ‘do nothing that causes harm’.

Julia Sigwart and Paolo Viscardi both spoke about different aspects of the National Museum of Natural History in Dublin or the ‘Dead Zoo’ as it is affectionately known locally. Paolo spoke in a heartfelt way about the challenges in managing an offsite store for natural history collections where the building isn’t suitable for purpose and there are precious few resources available to be invested in it. Many heads around the room nodded in recognition and sympathy. Julia described an innovative education project, Co BiD, run by the Museum in collaboration with University College Dublin where undergraduate students used the collections in research projects as part of their science courses. Students databased the collections and the Museum can boast an impressive total on many thousands of records going on-line in the space of a couple of years. Those of us who work in University Museums welcome student volunteer labour but it is an ever-changing resource. So many of us benefit from the skills and dedication of long-term volunteers with a passion for collections and the time and inclination to make a regular commitment. Julia developed a course, ‘Behind the Scenes at the NHM’ run in conjunction with Adult Education Department at UCD to pique the interest in this type of volunteer. This has been a winner all-round with a high level of interest in the course, increased profile for the Museum and the consequent recruitment of a significant amount of valuable volunteer labour.

Two speakers from the NHM Adrian Doyle and Dave Smith spoke about the Pest Management. Adrian described the concept and implementation of Risk Zones strategy adopted as part of IPM by the NHM. The entire museum was assessed and colour coded into zones to indicate severity of risk to collections from different types of pests. Walking into a red zone immediately lets you know the collections in that area are vulnerable. A number of protocols (with an emphasis on achievability) were developed and staff trained e.g. eating and drinking not permitted in red areas. A pilot study carried out in mammalogy reported significantly reduced problems. Dave Smith spoke about the application of GIS to IPM. It allows you to integrate pest trapping, rodent monitoring and building works information with a map of the building showing its risk zones and thereby graphically show up e.g. insect pest hotspots. Environmental data from loggers could be added in as well. It appears to be a powerful tool in managing a complex structure for pest control.

Having fed our minds all afternoon, we looked forward to feeding our taste buds and party animal tendencies in the evening. Yes – the conference banquet – which promised to be an extravaganza of fine food and wine, good music and dance. I have long harboured a desire (this may fall into the ‘get a life’ category of ambition but I don’t care) to dine alongside the dinosaur in the grand entrance of the NHM. Sadly I don’t often get invited to such events so this was an opportunity of a lifetime. We weren’t disappointed. Arriving, suitable got up in our finery – you’d hardly recognise us as usually scruffy curator types- we got in the swing of things with a glass of fizz whilst chatting to colleagues loafing in Waterhouse Way. Then into a star spangled central hall and dinner. Now maybe I am easily impressed and I’m told the starry backdrop the standard way of screening off the functions area in the central hall but was well taken with the cosmic effect! Great food, copious wine, friends old and new and of course the dancing added up to a memorable evening. The next day’s hangover was a little special too but we won’t go there.