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**NatSCA Papers Given at the
2005 NatSCA / SPNHC / GCG / ICOM Conference**

**the Natural History Museum, London
June 13th - 18th 2005**

***“Realising Standards”
Wednesday 15th June, 1.30pm onwards***

Subject Specialist Networks – developing a subject specialist network for the natural sciences in the UK

- Nick Gordon, Chairman NatSCA

One of the key drivers behind the formation of NatSCA was the recognition that natural sciences in Britain needed a stronger voice and would be better served by a larger organisation rather than a number of disparate groups. While NatSCA has a national scope, producing publications, organising meetings, seminars and training, it was recognised that there was a clear need for a national network of natural science curators and institutions to take projects forward on a local, regional and national level.

A framework partnership was developed to support a grant bid, including The Natural History Museum, National Museums and Galleries, Merseyside, and museums from the Regional Hubs. The aim of the bid was to develop a framework for a national network based on the major regions of the UK. At the time of writing the abstract the first meetings were being organised. This paper will consider the progress to date, issues that have been raised and the priority areas identified for the Network to address.

‘Standardising’ within a multi-disciplinary museum: How do the natural sciences collections fit in?

- Donna Young, Collections Manager (Botany), World Museum Liverpool, National Museums Liverpool

- Anne Fahy, Senior Registrar, National Museums Liverpool

National Museums Liverpool (NML), the only national museum in the UK based solely within the regions, became a national museum in 1986, though its existence goes back to the founding of the original Liverpool museum in 1851. Today, NML consists of eight museums and galleries. As with many museums that were founded in the 19th century, the collections are encyclopaedic, encompassing the natural and physical sciences, maritime and urban history, fine and decorative arts, ethnology, antiquities and field archaeology. Owing to the diverse nature of the organisation, differing standards and practices had developed in each of the separate venues, and in some cases within individual departments. Over time, it became apparent that in order to operate effectively it was necessary for corporate standards to be developed. Although an institution-wide Acquisitions and Disposal Policy had existed for some time, a Collections Management Policy covering other collections-related activities had not been developed.

A Working Group comprising conservators, curators, registrars and auditors was established with the brief to develop a Collections Management Policy for the organisation. In creating the policy a number of issues had to be taken into account. Primarily these were the institution’s legal and ethical responsibilities, the institution’s aims and objectives and NML’s existing corporate standards.

The Collections Management Policy was rolled out to staff in 2004 and articulated how NML manages its collections and the standards to which staff are expected to work. To support the policy, collections man-

agement procedures are being developed in-house, which take into account external standards and our own internal requirements. In the region of twenty procedures have been identified, largely similar to those in *Spectrum*, the UK documentation standard, developed by the MDA.

For specific discipline standards, such as those relating to the natural sciences, we have looked at subject specific resources, such as the 'Standards in the Care of Collection' Guidelines, published by the Museums and Galleries Commission (now MLA).

The overall production and dissemination of NML's procedures is the responsibility of the Registrar department, which was created in 2003 with the specific brief of introducing collections management standards and procedures across NML. The task facing the department was to develop and implement policies and procedures that were appropriate for the entire organisation, while taking into account the particular requirements of collections. The process is co-ordinated by the Senior Registrar, who works in close consultation with curatorial, conservation and audit colleagues to ensure that the procedures comply with the Trustee-approved policies, the requirements of audit and Government Accounting, as well as the individual types of collection. To support the procedures, 'guidelines' are being prepared on subjects such as copyright, couriering, marking and labelling and the UK Government Indemnity Scheme.

The aim of this paper, presented at the *Realising Standards 2005* conference, was to question whether the requirements of natural science collections are so very different from other collection disciplines. For any institution, the introduction of new standards will always be met with a degree of resistance. In the case of NML, some divisions and curatorial departments had developed their own methods of working and did not see the need for change. For some, the imposition of what they saw as corporate standards was not welcome, arguing, "we've always done it this way". Some felt that 'shoe-horning' would compromise their working practices. The Working Group found that this understandable attitude was not restricted to natural science collections. However key curatorial activities were identified that highlighted differences in methodology and approach between the natural sciences and other disciplines. To illustrate this, the subject of outward loans management was discussed.

- As an organisation, NML lends items to around eighty venues a year; approximately half of the loans are from natural science collections. Loans are made for a variety of purposes, but for natural science, the majority of loans are made to research institutions, mostly museum-based but some that are not, for example, to universities, colleges, or gardens without a public 'exhibit' arena to their preserved collections. For these non-museum borrowers, museum conventions may appear to be over-complicated and bureaucratic. For example, museums may have requirements regarding security arrangements that may be unfamiliar and appear demanding or restrictive.
- Research organisations often see the collections in a different manner to museums. An example of this could be a more cautious approach to destructive sampling taken by museums. This may seem to be obstructive, but is in line with the museum role of preserving collections for the future. NML considers each request for destructive sampling on a case-by-case basis.
- In some disciplines, such as botany, there is an unspoken reciprocal agreement between institutions, covering the postage cost of specimens. This is a departure from normal museum practice, where the expectation is that the borrower will meet all costs associated with the loan.
- The period of loan is another area where there is a distinction between 'research-based' and 'display' loans. Although we do set all of our loans within a timeframe, we understand that research loans may need to be more fluid in their timing. Within NML, we have developed a management tool to cope with this and track renewals.
- NML's policy does not generally permit loans to private individuals, with the exception of research loans to bona fide researchers, within the safeguards that we have established to determine a researcher's credentials and comply with insurance issues.

- Within the arts and humanities, some of the standards required would seem excessive for the loan of natural science collections. A good example of this would be the application of ‘facilities reports’ for all science loans. The Standard Facilities Report, developed by the UK Registrars Group, allows potential borrowers to provide lenders with information regarding the facilities at the borrowing venue. Information requested deals with areas such as access issues and environmental controls. A requirement for this type of information in relation to a research loan, may appear to be extreme, but would be vital for certain loans from our collections. As a general rule, we would not require a facilities report to be completed for a loan from our natural science collections. However, we do expect borrowers to comply with our handling instructions and where possible, ideal environmental conditions for the storage of our collections. A facilities report would be still relevant in the case of natural science collections being loaned for display.

Having examined curatorial activities, it was recognised that there are differences in approach and that ‘one size’ does not necessarily ‘fit all’. In relation to loans, we have identified a core procedure that ensures a clear audit trail showing that a specimen has left NML and been returned within a set time frame, that appropriate documentation has been created prior to the specimen leaving the institution and that the necessary and appropriate checks have taken place prior to loan. There are two variations; the first is a full application, including the use of facilities reports, managed by the Registrar. This is always used for certain collections, such as the fine and decorative arts.

The second is mainly used within the natural science departments. We have called this the ‘Advanced-Approved’ procedure. Within this, the curatorial departments have identified parts of their collections for which the application of the full procedure would not be appropriate. That is not to say the shortened process is always applied to these selected collections. Depending upon the nature of the loan and the material requested, it may be considered that it would be more appropriate to apply the full procedure. This allows us flexibility in responding to loan requests and is approved and monitored by our internal auditors.

In addition, a mechanism has been developed to track and monitor the progress of loans. A divisional bulletin is provided by the registrar, which lists all loans and their current status. Additional to this, regular meetings are held within departments, where loans are reviewed and decisions taken regarding any further action.

An integral part of developing all of the procedures is extensive consultation with all stakeholders. These include curatorial and conservation departments, registrars, auditors and senior management. Consultation is essential for feedback, review and amendment. All curatorial and conservation department heads are asked to comment on any new procedure. It is their responsibility to circulate it among their staff and provide a co-ordinated response per department. The Senior Registrar reviews the departmental responses and a follow-up meeting with departments may be held to discuss any concerns or to explain any aspects of the procedure, which are seen as a marked change from existing practice. The consultation process highlights conflicts in approach between departments, and attempts to reconcile them, without compromising NML’s overall objectives. An advantage of being a multi-site organisation is that procedures can be trialled at one venue before introducing them across the organisation.

A Collections Management Policies and Procedures Manual is being developed, which will be available to all staff and contain all collections-related policies, procedures, examples of forms and supporting information. This will be available as paper-based folders, but also on our Intranet.

The collections management procedures will provide staff and external bodies with clear guidelines about how NML uses its collections and should promote consistency in decision-making in relation to the collections, as well as consistency of practice within individual departments.

Each individual department may wish to develop their own detailed procedures to meet the specific needs of their disciplines. For example, Botany has strict quarantine guidelines that have to be followed for any item entering the department. Currently displayed as instructions within the packing room, these will be incorporated as appendices to the Collections Management Policies and Procedures Manual. In developing these appendices, subject specific issues can be addressed using particular terms of reference, e.g. the *Herbarium Handbook* published by Kew. Forum groups such as the *NHColl* (SPNHC) are a useful informal mechanism for providing insight into practices in other institutions. As with the newly assigned ‘Subject Specialist Networks’ (MLA), they can facilitate the sharing of expertise.

A key part of implementing standards within NML is the Collections Management Training Programme that has been developed in-house and delivered almost entirely by NML staff. Launched in November 2004 the programme consists of three modules covering a range of topics, such as acquisition, location control, loans management and documentation. The overall objective of the training is to provide staff with knowledge of NML's policies and procedures, in addition to providing them with training in fundamental aspects of museum work, such as environmental control, emergency planning and pest management. Many of NML's procedures are still in draft, and discussions during the training programme have been fed back into their development. The response from the delegates to the programme has been very positive, resulting in an improved sense of corporate identity and recognition of the need for unified systems. Delegates have also gained a greater understanding of the differences and similarities between disciplines. This can only improve communication and improve cross-departmental co-operation.

The development and implementation of the collections management procedures is very much work in progress at National Museums Liverpool. However, by recognising that there are differences between disciplines, and by trying to be inclusive, we are creating standard procedures that work for everyone.

Applying the theory of minimising the risks from the ten agents of deterioration at the Herefordshire Museum Resource and Learning Centre

- Kate Andrew

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Abstract

The West Midlands region of Britain is home to two new collection centres, housing around 200,000 items including substantial natural history collections. The Herefordshire Museum Resource and Learning Centre was officially opened on 28th February 2005 and the Ludlow Library and Museum Resource and Learning Centre was officially opened by HM the Queen in May 2003. Both centres were created from briefs written by the author that set out the need to minimize the risks from the ten agents of deterioration, a model first developed by the Canadian Conservation Institute and expanded by Robert Waller of the Canadian Museum of Nature. Both centres received substantial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and capital investment from the relevant local authority.

The Hereford centre is a refurbishment of an existing building, the Ludlow project a new build. The differing approaches to achieving minimal risks from each agent and the effectiveness of these measures were compared and contrasted in the presentation given to the SPNHC meeting.

The gestation and progress with the Ludlow project has been described in the past to UK audiences, for example at the 1999 GCG meeting in Dublin and the 2002 NSCG meeting in Norwich, so this paper will cover only the planning of the Hereford project. The full article is due to appear in Collections Forum.

The Herefordshire Museum Resource & Learning Centre – a complex 3 phase project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Herefordshire Council

Hereford in context

Hereford is the county city of Herefordshire and is located within the West Midlands region, sharing borders with Wales, Shropshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire.

The Hereford Museum was originally set up as a county service but local government re-organisation in 1974 saw the county merged with Worcestershire. From 1974 to 1998, the museum served only a city function with the county function covered by the County Museum in Worcestershire. Since 1998, Herefordshire Heritage Services has served a countywide function for the re-established county of Herefordshire.

Since 1998 many issues around duplication and delivering services across the new county emerged. The effective operation of the museum service was one of these issues. Collections and staff were spread across five main sites and several other locations within or close to the city of Hereford with at least fifteen different stores many of which were inadequate conversions of domestic or industrial facilities. The social history collection was particularly badly dispersed, making access for research or display very difficult.