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Conservation at the Horniman - new for Old. Applying standards to new and historic galleries**- Louise Bacon**

Horniman Museum, 100 London Road, Forest Hill, London SE23 3PQ, UK

In 1898 Frederick Horniman commissioned Charles Harrison Townsend to design a museum to house his collection of Natural History specimens and Anthropology collections. The two original galleries are now a Grade II* listed building as is a later additional gallery designed by Harrison Townsend in 1911. In recent years the Horniman Museum had a programme re-developing the two Ethnography galleries as well as creating a new gallery for musical instruments in a purpose built Heritage Lottery Funded Building. The Natural History gallery has undergone no large-scale renovation since 1957. It still contains the original 1911 mahogany showcases, which will be retained. Applying conservation and collections care standards to historic galleries and old showcases has its problems and its challenges.

Hatching a Plan: Developing modern standards in egg collections**- Douglas Russell**

Bird Group, Department of Zoology, The Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring

Recent research based on egg collections has highlighted the need for obtaining a continuing time series of avian eggs. Modern specimens are frequently under-represented in museum collections following tightened legislation over the last fifty years. It has become apparent there is a need for proactive discussion at international level with regard to obtaining modern comparative specimens of avian eggs within a controlled ethical and legal framework. The only current techniques for continuing a time series, which are presently open to institutions, include collecting under licence, police seizure and through avian breeders. This presentation will examine the merits of the various acquisition options available and discuss possibilities for national cooperation. Furthermore, fulfilling access demands has led directly to increased pressure to supply collections data online. The need for international cooperation, consensus and consultation in the release of sensitive data online is discussed, with particular reference to the challenges of balancing increased public access against the sensitivity of data used in researching species conservation.

Regional Collections at Risk: Why funding stuffed otters and dried nettles is seen as an easy cut to make.**- Clare Stringer****Leeds Museum Resource Centre***Introduction*

Most of the UK's 20 million natural science specimens held outside of the nationally funded institutions are in local government hands. It is crucial that these regional councils understand the value of the resources they control and take pride in owning and using them.

An average local authority councillor will have to listen to appeals for money from many sectors. Roads, housing, healthcare, social services and, of course, museums to name a few. Even within museums there are obviously divisions: art, history, ethnography, archaeology, natural science and more. So how does such an average councillor decide where to allocate the money? In which direction is he or she more likely to be pulled? Just how appealing are stuffed animals, pickled fish and dried weeds anyway?

Informing the 'informed' decision makers

There can be no doubting the decline in the number of regionally held natural science collections over the past few decades. Although material has not necessarily been lost (amalgamations are common), local authorities have managed to stop funding collections by disposing of them. Often the collection has not had a curator for many years and so, with no advocate, councils may find it difficult to come across arguments for keeping the collections and easy to come up with arguments for their disposal. As has been discussed many times, when properly presented for consideration the advantages of keeping and funding natural science collections make them worthy recipients of local taxpayers money. It is raising these arguments in the town halls across the country that is the harder part, mainly because natural science collections are still often thought of as morbid rows of clumsy taxidermy and their curators as dusty relics of a now obsolete time.

A lot of these points could also be applied to some university held collections. Again collections find themselves in competition for money with many other departments. Although perhaps the role of the collections is more obvious to the management of an academic institution, occasions do arise in some institutions where the necessity for a natural science collection is questioned. This again may be put down to lack of awareness and proper understanding of the important role a collection can play when used to its full potential.

The value of natural science collections has been discussed often and in detail. Conferences have been held on it and countless papers written on it. The conclusion is nearly always that, when used effectively, natural science collections are an asset to their owners and deserving of staffing, investment and resources. But who comes to these conclusions? How many local authority managers or councillors ever come into contact with this literature let alone attend a conference on it? How much of this type of information ever reaches further than the natural scientists themselves? Collection managers with the responsibility for natural science are rarely natural scientists, there being so many disciplines a manager might move up from. Although there seems to be an innate recognition that natural science collections are worthy of time, money and staff, managers rely, in most cases, on the knowledge and enthusiasm of their natural science curator or conservator to justify these. However, without direct contact with a natural scientist, how many managerial staff would be able to put together robust arguments on the value of natural science collections? Those with a background in natural science certainly should be able to but I would also suggest that those who have been engaged in a conversation with an enthusiastic natural scientist in their employment would also be able to produce a relatively articulate defence.

A busy local authority museum manager, juggling budget cuts, strategic planning, obsessive employees and demanding councillors, might certainly decide to rely on their natural science staff for justifications of their collection holdings. It is when the scientists are absent that problems may arise. Without the ear of a natural scientist managers make decisions on a collection's future based on the loudest voices around them, be it social historians, education officers or outreach workers, and see less and less value in natural history. While managers I have spoken to agree that natural science is a 'crucial part of the local history story' they have decided on their cuts and have chosen natural science, one of the reasons being a perceived lack of interest from the public. This is partly because the themes of temporary exhibitions and public enquiries naturally drift towards staffed disciplines giving more fuel to the argument that the natural science collections are of little interest to the local community (more on this later).

It is therefore important that natural scientists take the opportunity to discuss their collections and spend time proving to management and senior management the great benefits to be had from continuing to fund their natural science collection.

Job cuts and lack of applicants

For some reason, and I am only writing from my own experience, local authorities seem at best extremely reluctant or at worst completely unable to make staff redundant (although this may sound like an advantage it can result in unsuitable people residing in a job for life!). They therefore often look to that dreaded term 'natural wastage' for cuts. St. Albans, North Hertfordshire and Portsmouth (and there may be others) have all relatively recently lost their natural science posts with the departure of their natural scientist. It is at this point local authorities, under constant pressure to tighten their belts, now start wondering why the post needs funding at all. It is here, just as their loudest supporter leaves, that the collections are in greatest need of advocacy and when NatSCA and the natural science community should be of most help.

Unfortunately, local council cuts are not entirely to blame when it comes to filling posts. There has been an alarming lack of qualified applicants to natural science curator jobs in recent times. This is probably a subject for another talk but it is difficult to berate a council, who have tried and failed to find a suitable applicant, about their lack of someone in post. Although a manager at Portsmouth did admit that the salary level was certainly an issue he also commented that 'there didn't seem to be many natural scientists out there.' It costs a lot to advertise a position, especially more than once, and constant failure makes an already fragile agreement to fund the post less and less likely.

Although losing a natural science post does not necessarily put the existence of the collection at risk, it does put it at a severe disadvantage. Its profile will inevitably diminish and its condition, use and value may be threatened. Most importantly, decisions on its future might be made without access to relevant arguments

and justifications i.e. a council may lose its capability to make 'informed' decisions.

What needs to be done?

'Perhaps the greatest overall challenge for natural science collections is ... to dispel, once and for all, the image of collections sitting somewhere in the basement of a building, the specimens and their curators gathering dust together.'

Pers. comm. Prof. Keith Thompson, Director, Oxford University Museum (retired)

Changing the public perception of natural science collections is a topic that has been repeatedly aired. However, I do not apologise for raising this again as the battle is a long way from being won.

Some local authority curators are steps ahead in this with initiatives and working practices that have swelled their ranks rather than see them dwindle. For example, Hampshire County Council's natural science department is visited by every newly elected county councillor during his or her induction. The reasons for keeping the collections are explained as well as the wide variety of uses the collections are put to – a classic case of communication winning-over ignorance. Hampshire run extremely effective councillor and volunteer open days where the opportunity is taken to educate, enthuse and enthrall otherwise indifferent or even hostile decision makers and stakeholders. Another string to their bow is a comprehensive and accessible website, listing, among many other things, the reasons why Hampshire holds and funds a biology collection. In a quick surf through other local authority websites the standards and content varies considerably - from no reference at all to collection holdings (just information on events and opening times) to relatively detailed information on the reasons for collecting and the collection.

Another area exploited by some local authority museums is a strong connection to their local environmental record centre. Sometimes, of course, the museum *is* the local record centre. This and other types of cross-departmental council working, with plenty of internal and external partnerships, sets collections up as lynchpins in a web of biological recording activity. They become indispensable and may even attract funding, all of which could well be crucial to the endurance of a collection - 'a museum now seems to need to be part of a local records centre partnership merely to survive.'

I also think that the public perception of natural science collections is almost completely divorced from its perception of environmental conservation, a subject that enjoys wide support. The natural science community needs to work harder to get the public to link these two elements together, something museum scientists do without a second thought. In fact collections and the environment often seem to be thought of as opposing factions rather than supportive team mates – 'mounted heads of wildebeest are certainly not the obvious choice to convey modern attitudes to ecology, precious global diversity and the wonder of life.'

In conclusion

Although a lot of the responsibility for advocacy and promotion lies with university and local authority natural science staff, they could be helped by the actions of national institutions. Anything we do as a profession to promote awareness and raise the profile of natural science collections goes a long way to help non-natural scientists appreciate their value. NatSCA has a role to play in this and natural scientists working in museums across the country could think about how they might further promote their collections and not 'seem slightly embarrassed by them'.

Local authority natural scientists need to raise their voices and work even harder on communicating with their public, managers and councillors. This is no mean feat given that funding and staffing cuts leave the average local museum professional with more work to do than a moth in a taxidermy store.

For some good examples see:

Nudds, J.R. and Pettit, C.W. (eds.). 1997. *The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections*. Geological Society, London.

Pettit, C. 1991. Putting 'bloody mice' to good use. *Museums Journal*, 91(8), 25-28

<http://www.hants.gov.uk/museums/>

Palmer, C. 2004. *The functions of museums and records centres and how they have changed*. Natural Partners: biodiversity observations and collections (conference held at National Museum & Gallery of Wales, Cardiff, 2nd-3rd July 2004) http://www.nfbr.org.uk/html/conference_2004.html

Millard, T. and Taylor M. 2005. Are stuffed animals, or mounted specimens, the secret weapon in your museum's collection?

Museums Journal, 2005(5), 15

Croft, C. 2002. Animal magic: Do our furred and feathered friends have a future as exhibits? *Museums Journal*, 2002(9), 32-35

Adult education as a tool for volunteer training and recruitment

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We all know that volunteer labour is integral to the normal functioning of almost every museum, in both the public and research sides of Museum life. There is naturally a constant concern about standards to ensure that the volunteer-museum relationship is constructive for all parties. Particularly treacherous is striking an effective balance between initial training investment from (paid) staff and the capricious promise of unpaid effort, compared to the eventual benefits volunteers bring. The National Museum of Ireland Natural History Division is scandalously understaffed—with two full time curators for a significant European capital’s collections—thus recruiting a core of reliable volunteers is clearly a priority under our new scheme to improve collections access. However, for historical socioeconomic reasons in the Republic of Ireland there is not the established culture of “volunteerism” that other countries can depend on. Adult education is a creative and effective solution to answer both recruitment *and* training issues for museum volunteers.

In Autumn 2004, we elected to pursue an Adult Education module as an addition to our joint teaching programme with University College Dublin. The resulting course “*Dead Zoo: behind the scenes in the Natural History Museum*” aimed to introduce interested members of the public to the living scientific research face of the National Museum of Ireland (NMINH). The other, unadvertised aim of this course was to train a group of prospective volunteers with an effective six-week orientation programme.

The class was administered through the University College Dublin Adult Education Centre and advertised through the annual UCD “interest courses” brochure. The Adult Education Centre was particularly eager to help as they have experienced a chronic shortage in tutors for science-based interest courses, despite demand from the public. The established administration of the Centre also handled all queries, registration, and student fees. A small honorarium was paid to two tutors who presented the six weekly sessions. Classes were scheduled during working hours, two hours per week, and held in the NMINH exhibits building. Place and time were carefully selected—all students who were free to attend the class would potentially be free in future to volunteer. Topics were selected from a range of subjects, including lectures and discussions on the breadth of uses of museum objects, background in biodiversity and evolution, and an introduction to object conservation. Learners were typically retired individuals, with a keen interest but no academic background in the sciences.

Many of the learners who took this course said that they enjoyed it immensely—the small class size and novel setting made for an exciting contrast to the typical dowdy evening lecture series. The course was particularly praised for being held in the daytime—the only Adult Education course not offered in the after-work hours—as retired individuals many of the learners are often hesitant to travel alone in the city after dark. Covering a breadth of topics, loosely themed on “collections-based biology” also allowed learners who missed one or more classes to feel they could return without having fallen behind in lessons.

These learners come away with a common basic knowledge about collections and museum procedures taught in a structured course, and we impressed upon them the important contributions that could be made by volunteering. Indeed, since the course required a fee, volunteering (for free) can feel even more rewarding. This learning experience was highly successful for the 16 students enrolled, and “*Dead Zoo*” was an integral part in our Teaching Programme 2004, which was awarded the top prize for outreach in the all-Ireland Museum of the Year Awards. Six individuals (i.e. one-third of the class) have stayed on as volunteers in various capacities, suited to their interests and abilities. More importantly, the whole class has come away with a new understanding that there is a life “behind the scenes” of the Dead Zoo.

Risk zones for IPM: from concept to implementation

- Doyle, Adrian M.*; Pinniger, David**

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