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Author(s): Cassar, M.

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“What’s in the box?” Collection Access and Care — New Directions for the Millennium : Part I

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A Cost/Benefit Approach to Collection Care

*May Cassar
Museums & Galleries Commission*

Museums and other collecting organisations inhabit a changing socio-economic environment: with rising costs, a sharper competitive environment and a squeeze on funding. A greater diversity of individuals is seeking to use collections in a variety of ways. Increased access to collections can sometimes be promoted as a way of justifying resources to support collection care. So questions of what to do with a collection, which items to preserve, how much and what to do to them, and who is involved in the decision are not just simple technical matters relating solely to preservation.

- How do we prepare to respond effectively to different demands that the changing priorities of an institution may make on a collection, so that an acceptable balance is maintained between access and care?
- How do we go about ensuring that all the issues which contribute to a balanced decision are being taken on board?

Collection care needs are more likely to be understood and resolved if they are debated and discussed within the context of the institution's aims and objectives. This broad setting brings together different people with different ideas for collection use and introduces more complex relationships than a simple one-to-one contact between the curator or conservator and the collection.

Given the understandable pre-occupation of museums with issues of survival such as threatened or real funding cuts, management may ignore collection care issues unless they are perceived as integral to the institution's overall plan. In fact, it is becoming more difficult for museums to commit money to anything that is not a core activity, even when it falls within its plan; this is particularly so for 'behind-the-scenes' work.

So it is vital that collection care issues are presented as an unalienable part of this plan. The priorities of collection care — no matter how urgent or important — cannot stand apart from the overall priorities of the museum; if they do, they are unlikely to attract support and may be sidelined indefinitely.

So how can resources for collection care be argued for, on an equal basis and at the same time that collection access is being planned? Prioritising resources involves a wide range

of internal and external interests. Care must be taken not to tilt the balance of the argument either too much in favour of access so that collections are exposed to unacceptable risk of damage, or too much in favour of collection care to the exclusion of collection use. The skill is to know when the right balance has been struck.

What arguments are usually employed to convince others of the need for action? We generally use technical arguments to persuade others of our point-of-view; we argue for more equipment, additional space, improved training, more staff etc. maybe ignoring the financial straits in which the institution might be in; we intone dire warning of deterioration caused by a poor environment; we write condition reports noting the extent of damage and we send them to whoever we think ought to read them. But is this approach convincing? How easy is it to digest and use a detailed technical report? Will it enable the problem to be prioritised? Will whoever receives the report have time to read it?

In order to overcome some of these problems a cost/benefit appraisal method can be used to provide shape and form to our arguments. This is necessary because others must be convinced of the need for investment; others are interested in collection use; other are making decisions on the allocation of resources; others may end up making collection care decisions and outside pressures may force our hand when we are unprepared.

A cost/benefit appraisal exercise consists of two parts: a financial appraisal of capital and revenue costs and a non-quantified assessment of benefits. The financial appraisal involves obtaining estimates for all the options being considered. For example if options for housing a collection are being considered these might include: cost of design work, surveys, building works, fitting out, consultancy fees, running and maintenance costs. But if only the costs are compared, it is almost inevitable that the option with the lowest price estimate will be selected. After all, why should we spend more than necessary?

There may be times when the benefits could justify a higher expenditure. But how can we tell the difference between justifiable expenditure and unnecessary waste? Some form of comparable measure of the benefits of each option, or options appraisal is needed.

This part of the appraisal enables potential benefits to be measured by assessing the extent to which the options fulfil the aims and objectives of the institution's plan. The emphasis given by management to individual aims and objectives may change from year to year and this will also affect funding priorities. So the relative importance of the aims and objectives must be clarified before an options appraisal is carried out.

The different options will have a different scale of benefits for a collection and its host institution. These benefits can be numerically scored. This is the outcome of the discussion on how well each option fulfils the individual aims and objectives of the plan. The exercise of comparing all the options with the museum's plan should involve a multidisciplinary team including curators, conservators, scientists, researchers, education officers, events managers, marketing personnel and building managers.

By comparing the estimated costs and benefits of each option, the option which appears to deliver the greatest benefit at the lowest costs emerges as the preferred solution. If a costly option emerges as the one likely to deliver the greatest benefit, its acceptance can be argued more convincingly, particularly if sensitivity analysis of the preferred solution has been carried out. This analysis will test the robustness of the proposal compared to other discarded options. These test consists of asking "what if.....?" questions, to see whether any change of circumstances might produce a change of the preferred option.

Conclusion

A cost/benefit appraisal method has a number of advantages:

- It can convince others of the need for appropriate levels of investment
- It involves others who may be more involved with collection use than collection care
- It involves those making decisions on how resources are allocated
- It involves others who may not deal with collections on a day to day basis but whose decisions may affect the survival of a collection.

Using Botanical Records to Interpret Changes in Frequency of British Plants

Timothy C. G. Rich

Department of Biodiversity and Systematic Biology,
National Museum and Gallery of Wales.

Introduction

Change in frequencies of botanical records can help us to understand what is happening to the British flora. This has applications in monitoring for conservation and environmental change. There are three main types of botanical records which can be used:

1. *Herbarium records.* These are the most important source of high-quality information as identification can be verified and there are often useful details annotated onto the sheets. There are a few problems with incorrect or inconsistent labelling, and there are relatively few recent specimens due to changes in attitude to collecting.
2. *Literature records in floras and journals.* These tend to be well-known and widely available, but the identification cannot be verified without voucher material and the records are often copied uncritically.
3. *Field records.* These are unpublished notes or records made on standard Biological Records Centre record cards. They tend to be poorly documented, cannot be verified and the original details are relatively

inaccessible, though the summary details are often available on computer. Since the 1960s these have been the main source of records.

Original sources should always be checked. Overall, botanical records tend to be incomplete, biased towards well-known sites, ambiguous, a small sample of the whole picture, and a fascinating challenge to put together. Analysis of the changes in number of records is further complicated by variations in recording effort, and in most cases it is only possible to assess the general trends from the data. The following four examples have been selected to illustrate how the data can be used and some of the problems.

Cotswold Pennycress (*Thlaspi perfoliatum*)

Records of this rare native species of the Cotswolds were compiled from a wide range of sources (Rich, Kitchen & Kitchen, 1989). After a careful conservative assessment of the records it has occurred in a total of 45 native and 37 introduced sites in Britain, but is now only known in nine native sites (80% decline).

Changes in the status of Cotswold Pennycress with time is difficult to interpret due to the inconsistency of botanical recording. When the total number of individual records per decade are plotted there are large fluctuations (Figure 1), which are probably explained better in terms of the recording behaviour of botanists rather than changes in frequency of Cotswold Pennycress. With the rise in activity of the Botanical Society of London in the 1830s and 1840s, there is an increase in the number of records, followed by a trough in the 1850s when the Society collapsed. Collecting by its successor, the Botanical Exchange Club, in the 1860s and 1870s again results in many records with a peak in 1880. The trough in the 1890s is less easy to explain, but the troughs in the 1920s and 1940s may be due to the depression and Second World War respectively. A further rise in the 1950s and 1960s can be attributed to recording enthusiasm resulting from the Botanical Society of the British Isles Maps Scheme, and the rises in 1980s and 1990s to the conservation work carried out on this plant. The number of records per se is thus a poor measure of the status of the plant.

This type of variation can be simplified by summarising the records by 10-km square and/or decade, and extrapolating between the first and last dates of records. Figure 2 shows the number of native 10-km squares from which the plant would be expected to be recorded per decade assuming continuous presence in the 10-km square from the date of the first record to the last. The rise to a peak in the 1860s reflects the increasing knowledge of the distribution of the plant at a 10-km square level, with two main periods of decline, between 1900 and 1920, and in the 1950s and 1960s. The latter is due to the agricultural revolution. Figure 2 gives a better picture of changes in the frequency of the plant than Figure 1.

Red-tipped Cudweed (*Filago lutescens*)

This rare species is difficult to identify and has been poorly researched in Britain. A detailed study was therefore undertaken using mainly verified herbarium material from 20 herbaria, resulting in over 400 records.