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- what the main objectives and priorities for systematics research are;
- what is needed to achieve these objectives (in terms of training and education, information technology, networking, raising awareness and funding), and;
- how to implement the strategy.

Finally it will set out what the systematics community is committed to doing towards the strategy and make recommendations for action by others.

Developing the strategy

The strategy is being developed by a process of gathering information — on user needs, UK expertise, and institutions' collections policies — pooling expertise to draft a series of objectives, targets and action points; and then further shaping these into a strategy through a process of consultation with the wider systematics community, user groups and policy makers.

A survey of user needs was carried out by a market research group who interviewed a number of users from a wide variety of sectors; commercial, conservation, funding bodies, government departments, research, environmental consultancy and publishing. A summary of their report can be found on the Forum's Home Pages at (<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/uksf>). Many of the findings of the survey were to be expected although it has clearly demonstrated the common misunderstanding of what systematics is, even among other scientists.

The Forum aimed to complete the first draft national strategy by the end of August '97. This draft will form the framework for debate at a series of meetings to be held as part of the consultation process. Systematists registered on the database of UK expertise and user groups will be invited to regional meetings to discuss and input to the Strategy. Funding bodies and other user groups will be invited to a series of three seminars being held at The Natural History Museum, the Royal Botanic Gardens' Kew and Edinburgh, to raise awareness of the issues and build support for the Strategy. Specialist groups, such as BCG and GCG will also be invited to submit comments on the draft document.

Input from these groups will feed into the final document and be presented to the Directors of the major collections-holding institutions in December '97. The final document will be launched in March 1998 and be followed by a plan to implement the Strategy during the remainder of the year. During this time the Forum will also be looking for an institution to take over funding and hosting the Forum during its perceived future role in overseeing the implementation of the Strategy.

A National Strategy will only succeed if it is developed with consensus from the systematics community and policy makers. Anybody wishing to contribute to the developing document is therefore encouraged to attend the regional meetings.

For further information on these or other Forum activities please contact E. Watson at UK Systematics Forum, c/o The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Rd, London, SW7 5BD (e-mail: ew@nhm.ac.uk) or view the Forum's Home Pages at: <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/uksf>.

Inter-Departmental Curatorial Exchanges at the Natural History Museum, London

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Abstract

Curator exchanges can be an economical and practical way of sharing skills and experience. Decreases in funding coupled with the emergence of museum standards initiatives such as the Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC)'s Registration Scheme means that improved communication between and within museums is a particularly important issue. This paper describes a curator exchange between the Departments of Botany and Entomology in The Natural History Museum, London, and discusses some of the benefits and problems.

Background

The exchange described here is part of a curation training programme at the Natural History Museum, London. In the Museum, curators have exchanged within groups in the same department, between museums, and now between departments. In the Entomology Department, curators have spent some of their time expanding their knowledge and skills by working with new groups of insects. In July 1993, a curator from the Museum's Botany Department went to work in the Missouri Botanical Garden and the New York Botanical Garden for a month. The arrangement was reciprocal and a return exchange is expected. This paper describes a trial exchange between the Departments of Botany and Entomology.

Details

This exchange involved the participants working half of their time in each department over a six month period between November 1996 and May 1997. It was not a direct job swap. A variety of projects were designed to present the two participants with unfamiliar techniques and procedures.

Botany (Julia Pope)

In Botany, the exchange tasks covered a variety of curatorial activities including laying out, laying in, plant mounting, re-curation and databasing. The process of laying out specimens requires some understanding of the main characteristics of plant groups and the most effective ways of displaying them. Actually mounting the plants was useful in terms of learning about the techniques and materials involved.

Various herbarium arrangements are employed; the algae arranged alphabetically within major groups, the ferns and flowering plants according to various publications and lists. Laying in specimens in different parts of the collection

provided hands-on experience of these various herbarium arrangements.

Specimens to be sent on loan are bar-coded and databased. Although the Entomology Department's collections management system is also Paradox based, databasing in Botany was still a learning experience allowing familiarisation with plant characteristics, the collectors and their handwriting.

Entomology (Karen Webb)

Three main tasks were carried out in Entomology. The first was the re-curation of three genera of Owl butterflies (*Nymphalidae*, *Brassolinae*). Handling butterflies with forceps is a world away from boiling indestructible diatoms in acid. Several new skills were learnt whilst this task was carried out, including a limited amount about butterfly taxonomy since the re-curation was brought about as a result of a published revision. This was a finite and challenging task which brought about a considerable sense of achievement on completion.

The second task involved contributing towards a condition survey of some 5,000 butterfly accession drawers housed in a compactor unit. This vast resource had not been previously indexed at any level. The surveying process included indexing the collections to various levels of recoverability, cleaning the drawers and assigning a condition level. The survey was based upon the system used on the insect collections at the National Museum of Natural History, United States (McGinley 1992).

Registration with the MGC requires a rolling programme of condition surveys across the museum's collections. The exchange gave hands on surveying experience working closely with curators who were familiar with the surveying methods. This skill will be required by at least one member of staff in each department, in order to meet the requirements of museum registration.

The third task — the amalgamation of data from two sets of file cards onto one electronic database for the skipper butterflies (*Hesperiidae*) — emphasised the need for accuracy.

Benefits to the Museum

The exchange programme has benefited the Museum by helping to increase communication both internally and between the museum and other institutions. The programme has allowed curators to share skills, experiences, problems and solutions. From a personal point of view, the exchanges have given the participants the opportunity to expand their knowledge, and so potentially to develop their careers.

Problems

Considering the number of staff who have been involved with the exchange, remarkably few problems arose. The main difficulty was pressure on time. As the exchange was set up, two and a half days each week were to be spent in the host department. Ongoing commitments in our home departments meant that the time actually spent on the exchange was rather less. We believe that such an exchange would be more effective if full, rather than part time. This

would eliminate the intrusion of ongoing job commitments. Also, if each exchange shadowed their counterpart in the host department before swapping roles later in the exchange, intrusion on other members of staff in the host department would be minimised. The authors emphasise that all members of staff were very helpful during their exchange!

Although research and curation are separate divisions in both departments, the research staff had some input into the exchange. Some researchers needed convincing that the exchange would benefit the collections. The suggestion was made that the curators involved might profitably spend the exchange time on actually learning about their specialist groups. We found that exchanges benefit the collections directly, especially in terms of condition, accessibility and simply that another person in the world understands the machinations of botanical and entomological curation.

Conclusion

As participants in this ground breaking exercise in the Natural History Museum, we would recommend that at the start of any future comparable project, the exchangees should have clearly defined objectives. The job plan can then be tailored according to individual needs, so it might involve finite projects that emphasise a narrow specialisation, or general curatorial tasks that provide a broad overview of the host department. In a vote carried out after an internal seminar on the subject, the majority of staff expressed support for such exchanges.

References

McGinley R. J. 1992 There's the Management in Collections Management? International Symposium and First World Congress on the Preservation and Conservation of Natural History Collections. 3. 309-338.

IT - Access and Training

Nick Goff,

North Somerset Museum Service

I would like to talk about a project instigated by the Museum Training Institute that explored an important area for everyone in museums: Information Technology and its use.

We all know that IT is here to stay. It has percolated into all aspects of the commercial world. The CBI has identified IT skills as one of the key skills for effective organisations. It won't be long before facility in using a computer is considered a basic office skill, just as operating the telephone is now. We are no longer dependent on specialist telephonists.

Yet 45% of adults have not used IT. For many people their only contact with IT is in their workplace. Which means that, without some way of breaking into the world of IT, those who are not computer-literate and comfortable with the technology are caught in a Catch 22: lacking skills to get work and not having work to get skills. And as technology moves on apace they get left further behind.

Training in IT is one way to break out of this trap.