The Biology Curator

Title: IT - Access and Training

Author(s): Goff, N.

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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 exchangee 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.

The project MTI put together, called Technology Foresight, was one of many submitted to the Department for Education and Employment for funding under the UK Technology Foresight Programme. The majority of projects that received funding were related to academic or scientific developments, such as halibut farming and flatter television screens. MTI's proposal, to look at improving the use of IT in the museum sector, and the training implications of that, was the only one relating to our sector, and the only one to address "quality of life" issues.

So what happened? A series of workshops was run, by MDA, around the country for museum workers, to give a flavour of the ways IT could be used in museums. This went far beyond just computerising the documentation. Each workshop included a session on writing a World Wide Web page. The workshops also provided information for an analysis of training needs in IT. A report on the state of IT in the museum sector was commissioned. A forum of key individuals took place to bring together decision-makers in the museum sector, delegates from workshops, representatives from the training sector, from computing and academic worlds and from similar sectors such as libraries.

What has emerged is that the place and role of IT in museums is changing. We are moving on from collecting data about objects to making information available, in the form of modified and interpreted data, as a product, and often in a distributed way beyond the walls of the museum. There is also a pressure to make this information re-usable and able to be shared. In other words, IT can be a very powerful tool to help museums meet their aims, especially to improve access to collections and the information about them. Already there are pilot schemes running and useful models from other sectors.

But, to make the most of the opportunities, there is a need to ensure that appropriate training is available, at the appropriate level.

The results of the training needs analysis and the conclusions from the forum will be drawn together into a final report. This in turn is informing MTI's National Training Strategy. As a result the museum sector will have a much clearer idea of how to keep its head above water in the rising sea of new technology.

But possibly most importantly, Technology Foresight could unlock additional challenge funding that can make a real impact on the IT training needs across the museum sector, and in partnership with other sectors.

Hidden Treasures

M.H. Lazarus,

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

In 1989, the Conservation Project at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales was set up for an initial 2 year period eventually being extended to 5 years. Each department was assigned a conservator to be responsible for general care and condition of their collections. One of our tasks in the Botany Department was to tackle the storeroom which was known to hold slumbering treasures of prints and drawings but, due to the lack of staff and time, had remained, like Sleeping Beauty, unawakened.

The collection, currently totalling 9,095 includes important items such as *Banks' Florilegium,* a large collection of black and white engravings of *Flora Danica,* the Drinkwater Collection (a delightful group of 385 drawings in gouache of British plants), the Crowley Collection (a charming set of watercolours carried out by the family of sisters and aunts in Alton, Hampshire in the 1920s), 21 Nature prints by Bradbury and Evans in 1854, the Towers Collection and some recent work executed by Dale Evans (winner of the Jill Smythies Award for Botanical Illustration, 1991, The Linnean Society of London) who was employed in 1983 by the Museum to produce posters, notelets and cards. However, one of the largest single components of our holding is what we refer to as the Cymmrodorion Collection which contains an interesting and wide-ranging group of drawings. From the conservation point of view, a standard form was taken and adapted for our collection of photographs, lantern slides, wax models, wood sections and prints and drawings. In fact, although kept in old, heavy, wooden boxes (some badly damaged), the collection was in surprisingly good condition but was in need of cleaning, re-mounting onto acid-free mountboard and re-housing into acid-free solander boxes and kept in a cool, dry, stable environment.

Historical background

In 1939, the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion — a learned group of scholars dedicated to promoting all things Welsh in the Arts and Sciences — donated to the Museum, a large collection of botanical prints believed to have been formed by Welsh sculptor, Joseph Edwards (1814 - 82).

These 760 prints revealed treasures untold : each box contained new delights. Previously they had been accessed scientifically by genus and species but now new eyes saw them with the additional exciting dimension of exquisite draughtsmanship and historical importance in the analysis of the evolution of the relationship of art and science in the history of botany.

Within the total of 36 boxes, many of the milestones in botanical history are portrayed by a selection of the most talented botanical illustrators of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This article tells the story behind the artists and their works.

Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708-70)

Plantae Selectae (1772) by Georg Dionysius Ehret was one of the great European botanical iconographies, published towards the beginning of a 100 year period which might well be regarded as the golden age of European botanical drawing. It bears witness to the coming together of three vital elements : a superb artist, engravings of the highest quality by Haid, and an enlightened and wealthy patron.

Dr. Christoph Jakob Trew (1695-1769), an eminent physician and botanist from Nuremberg, was the patron who insisted that Ehret, in accordance with Linnaeus's system of classification (1737-38), should emphasise the 'sexual character' of each plant i.e. the parts of the flower. Between