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The Biology Curator

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dealt with. All the types have been databased, photographed, digitised and placed on an accessible web site and all new specimens are being treated in a similar fashion. The staff have been able to plan for the future and there is plenty of expansion space. Incoming new material, once frozen, awaits incorporation on open shelves [Fig.6]. Precautions against pests include the periodic use of CS gas to fumigate the collection and regular placements of insect light traps.



Fig.6 Material awaiting incorporation

Prof. Baas then took great delight in showing us the wood collection on which he works. He explained that specimens collected by botanists were of all shapes and sizes but those collected by foresters were neat rectangular blocks. The Rijksherbarium has a large collection of samples from what was Dutch New Guinea (Indonesia) and this has been augmented since 1968 by further duplicate material from Kew Gardens and the Commonwealth Forestry Commission in Oxford. All the samples have their registration number punched into the block.

We were then shown the Rijksherbarium Library by Mr C. Lut. He explained that the collection contains 35,000 books, 70,000 journals, 100,000 reprints, 90,000 microfiches and 50,000 illustrations. The library is managed by four and half members of staff, with a bookbinder employed part time. The collection is now housed on metal shelves with no book beyond reach and plenty of expansion space. Computerisation of this literature started in 1970, over 150,000 titles have been listed and it is hoped to start putting this data onto the Internet next year. Rare volumes are kept in a separate locked room [Fig.7].



Fig.7 The rare books room

These included the first catalogue of Hortus Botanicus from 1660 with a plan of the garden; a 1564 cookery herbal; a Dutch 1771 version of Christ. Jacob Trew's "*Uitgezochte Planten*" of which only 57 copies are known; and three very rare volumes of *Natural Printing* by W. Alpherts (1859-1862) [Fig.8].



Fig.8 The Alphert volumes of Natural Printing

At the end of our tour, Mr Lut showed us the storage for some 4,500 original watercolours held in specially designed boxes and recently digitised, conserved and catalogued by an outside conservator. These included wonderful original drawings from the van Royen collection used by Seba in his descriptions. A marvellous finale to our Rijksherbarium visit.

Report compiled from contributions by:-

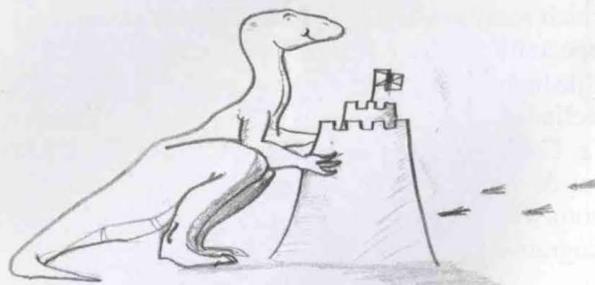
Amelia Campbell, Oliver Crimmen, Sean Davidson, Eiry Jagger, Mary Spencer Jones, James Maclean, Vicky Purewal, Clare Valentine and Kathie Way

Access to Collections

BCG, GCG, NSCG Joint Conference, Scarborough

April 3-4th 2000

Two days in sunny Scarborough!



As the rain closed in, I wondered if I would ever reach my destination. Scarborough and the Spa Complex seemed so far away as yet another tractor pulled out in front of me. After a somewhat slow drive I finally arrived at my very first Biology

Curators Group event. The 'Access to Collections' Conference attracted over 80 delegates and was the first meeting held joint with both the Geology Curators and Natural Sciences Conservation Groups; the perfect place to indulge in the age-old conference tradition of catching up with friends and colleagues and networking with new ones.

The diverse representation from across the natural sciences made this an ideal platform from which to begin to tackle issues of access to collections by swapping ideas, initiating dialogues, highlighting good practise and identifying areas for future development.

The most fundamental yet essential of questions was first on the agenda; 'Why and for whom do we wish to increase access to our collections?'

Our founding museums were developed in an era of intense social exclusion. Many of which sprang up from cliché clubs and societies that addressed only middle-class values. In the 1840's the Natural History Society of Newcastle made the decision to open it's doors to the public and was deluged with interest. Today the question is not **whether** to allow access to museum collections but **how** it can be achieved.

More than ever, museum collections are considered to be within the public domain and not the coveted possessions of the privileged few. A greater emphasis is being placed upon the museum's role in public education and funding bodies are increasingly demanding quantifiable results tested by performance monitoring, for example, the government's Best Value strategy. This era of overwhelming change brings with it exciting opportunities for museums and their stakeholders to revolutionise the way in which we approach access to collections.

This conference highlighted the very diverse nature of access issues that will, in the future, penetrate to the very foundations of all of our institutions.

Basic physical access to collections

Access to original material is sometimes difficult or impossible for many reasons. Firstly and fundamentally, if an object is actively deteriorating future access to it of any kind is uncertain. If this goes un-addressed, documentation and casts or replicas may become the only evidence of the object's existence and a vital link to it. Caroline Butler (National Museums and Galleries of Wales) told the conference of one such situation. The Bendrix formation in southern Wales contains many bipedal dinosaur trackways, some have been lifted from the site to avoid damage caused by erosion and fossil collectors. In 1996, the exciting find of a quadrupedal trackway was made but it could not be removed from the site and was subject to heavy marine erosion. Fast action had to be taken to avoid losing it to the

elements so a cast of it was made. During the following winter the lower portion of the trackway was eroded and the cast now stands as the only complete record of this important discovery.

Secondly, John Martin (Leicester City Museums) pointed out that there are legal barriers to the removal of an object from its find site or its movement across borders. Uncertainty over property rights to objects may also occur and stifle access. Good record keeping and adherence to collection management guidelines can often avoid this situation.

Museum professionals and collections

As the waves lapped at the sides of the conference (I'm not being romantic here, I mean literally!) discussion progressed onto staff access to the collections. Physical deterioration of objects that are already in the stores can create barriers for intellectual access, as can poor specimen preparation. Conservators obviously have a keystone role in maintaining a specimen's integrity, as do Curators in spotting problems in collections early or even before they happen.

Staff access may seem like a very basic requirement but it isn't that simple. As Vicky Purewal (National Museums and Galleries of Wales) illustrated with historic botanical specimens, some collections may carry a health hazard for those in contact with them. This kind of situation can restrict even staff access to the collections and ultimately requires extremely careful and strict management.

Disorganised and under-documented stores are not hard to find. However, this is unsurprising when the additional pressures placed on curators and collections managers are considered and added to the number of natural science collections currently cared for by non-specialists.

So how can we expect to offer quality access for others if we do not have it ourselves?

'Collections must be sorted to be accessible' **Geoff Hancock, Hunterian Museum, Glasgow**

Collections must be organised, documented and protected in order to be accessible.

All of this ratifies the importance of a sound collections management policy and accompanying appropriate conservation program.

After a full day of coffee drinking, gossip and general conferencing I retired to my hotel. To add insult to injury on the way the weather threw its final wildcard at us; snow. Slightly soggy around the edges, I checked-in and it suddenly dawned on me that I was actually staying in 'Fawlty Towers', complete with Spanish waiter/porter/doorman who I'm sure was called Manuel. Thankfully there was no complementary brown rat called 'Basil' thrown in,

along with the towel and dinky toiletries. I made my way to the conference dinner in search of other like-minded museum professionals to quaff wine with and was not disappointed. After a sumptuous meal we retreated to the 'Hole in the Wall', stage to the unofficial B.C.G. annual darts contest that I must admit was a dangerous spectator sport! I decided to try the pubs very own birch wine, which I can assure you was a novel and quite unique experience, which I'm not sure if I'll be repeating!

Opening up collections to the public

After a period of sleep, not necessarily good, I was ready for action and to tackle the problems of providing public access to our collections.

The museum acts as an interpreter between the object and the world. Andy Newman (Museums Studies Department, University of Newcastle) pointed out that the natural sciences in particular have a special role to play in society because they can help define mans relationship with his environment. This can help individuals and communities to develop an enriched sense of identity and belonging and can become a powerful tool. We can also facilitate visitor learning by providing a valuable access route to the scientific thought process.

With 'education, education and education' as Labour's war cry as they came into office, it is obviously now high on the agenda for museums. This links neatly into other current issues affecting access such as life-long learning, the new National Curriculum and social inclusion. Natural Science collections have the opportunity to positively respond to these government initiatives, therefore opening new gateways for funding, advocacy and support. Partnerships with organisations with special expertise in the skills needed to initialise programmes for increased access and social inclusion should be exploited to the full, for mutual benefit. Programmes can be planned to allow development in these areas in a strategic manner but should be fluid enough to incorporate short-term opportunities.

Within these programmes, interpretation needs to be as varied as possible if the majority of the learning styles and abilities in museums actual and potential audiences are to be reached. Museums also need to provide a 'hook' to gain the initial interest of audiences. This could be in a variety of forms from workshops to a special project. One example of this is a project run by the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, which specifically targeted school groups and helped teachers address some of the objectives of Maths year 2000. It mainly involved a numeracy trail at eight differentiated levels around the natural history galleries. A small amount of additional equipment was provided by the museum such as trundle wheels and stopwatches. Learning areas covered include estimating and measuring, map

grids, keys, data collection and symmetry and practical activities included calculating the speed of ants in a live exhibit.

'Objects of Desire' provides an interesting example of how diverse audiences can become integrally involved in natural sciences collections. The Hancock Museum in Newcastle invited 1,000 local people from diverse backgrounds to select an object from the geology stores. These then formed the central focus of a major people's display at the museum. Gillian Mason highlighted the problems of sustaining ongoing relations with the groups. Relationships with audiences new and old require time and resources to build and this should not be underestimated.

The concept of open storage is being debated throughout the world and is already widely used in North America. It can be a tool to increase awareness of the roles of museums and the value of 'reserve' collections. It stresses that exhibition just the tip of the iceberg, especially in natural sciences. It can also significantly increase the use of collections. Questions such, as 'does it actually increase access and is this quality access, what is its place' are all being raised. As yet, there is not sufficient research available to satisfactorily answer these.

Staff attitudes are often a barrier to access and once these are broached, half the battle is won.

Once measures to increase the accessibility of our natural science collections are in place, the role of marketing becomes increasingly important to help inform potential audiences of the changes. Improved access is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Simon Knell (Department of Museum Studies, Leicester) highlighted that increasing access may not result in a tangible rise in overall visitor numbers but almost certainly an increase in visitor diversity.

The world outside the walls of the conference hall

Armed only with my stick of Scarborough rock and souvenir postcard I saddled up ready for one of the Conference trips. We headed north to a small well-hidden bay in search of evidence for some of the areas pre-historic inhabitants. As I descended the steep winding steps and the tide washed inwards fast I wondered whether we would be able to find anything here. However, I was not to be disappointed. The wet and windy weather that graced the conference had laden the cliff faces with additional water, causing fresh rock falls. Something lay awaiting discovery. As the loose rock fragments were brushed off the surface of a newly exposed bedding plane, a small run of dinosaur footprints saw daylight for the first time in over 65 million years. A truly magical moment that for me, solidified many of the surrounding access that

we had been discussing: access to the real artefacts, access to the processes of science.

After lugging an interesting specimen of fossil coral up the hill for the museum, we departed for Whitby Museum. This gave us a chance to see Kate Andrew's Conservation Award winning work on the wall mounted saurian collection. The restoration formed part of a project partly funded by the National Lottery. We heard of the complex and often painstaking processes involved in removing the extensive pyrite decay and historically applied lacquer coating on them. And admired the impressive results. The rest of this small museum is an interesting mix of many objects ranging from a large collection of Whitby jet to curiosities that form part of the local history.

Overall, the conference highlighted and illustrated the multi-faceted nature of access and its necessarily intimate relationship with social inclusion. The subject presents so many considerations for every museum, most of which too important to be neglected if the future of our museums and their collections is to be safeguarded. Answers to these problems are not available 'off the shelf' and a huge amount of work still needs to be carried out to facilitate maximised access to natural science collections. We need to act fast and with purpose if the future is to be grasped and used to our advantage. In response to this, anyone who is making an attempt to find solutions to access problems within museums should make it a priority to share this information with the rest of the profession.

This report was compiled by Kate Geddes from the papers given by the fourteen speakers at the conference, all of whom I would like to thank very much for helping to make it an enjoyable and thought provoking conference. I would like to extend a special thanks to all those involved in organising the conference.

Useful references:

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Kate Geddes
Leeds Museum

An Introduction To Molluscs Curation, Conservation and Uses

Oxford University Museum of Natural History

Monday 31st January 2000

Following on from successful one day meetings on bones, botany and entomology, the lesser tackled subject of molluscs was decided as this years first meeting. This was a very well attended meeting, perhaps highlighting the need for information and training on some of the less high profile collections.

PRESERVATION AND CURATION OF MARINE MOLLUSCAN SPECIMENS

Once specimens have been collected in the field, careful procedures must be followed to preserve and store them as permanent biological collections with lasting scientific value. The care and maintenance of a biological collection is referred to as '**curation**', and those who do this skilled task are '**curators**'. Clearly, the techniques required for preserving whole living animals are different from those necessary for dead shells, and are described separately below. There are, however, some similarities in the curation of both wet and dry material, which are discussed together.

It is often asked how many specimens should be collected to make a representative collection of a species? This depends upon many considerations, e.g. rarity, conservation considerations, specimen size, storage facilities, and the purpose of the collection. Clearly, for a thorough study of geographical distribution and morphological variation within a single species, large numbers of specimens and samples are desirable. At the opposite extreme, even a broken fragment of a very rare species may be a useful specimen. For a teaching collection, just a few shells may suffice. In general, museums should aim to house samples large and numerous enough to display the range of morphological and ontogenetic variation, to represent the geographical distribution and morphological variation across it, and to have material to spare for destructive dissection as required. For a common species of moderate size, a reasonable sample is 10 to 30 specimens from a locality.

1. Wet and dry collections

When making a collection of molluscs, there is always a dilemma about whether to keep live-collected specimens 'wet' (i.e. preserving both shell and soft parts in a fluid such as alcohol or formalin) or 'dry' (i.e. preserving shell alone, although as a compromise this may still contain the dried animal).