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The Biology Curator

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Biology Curators Group Submission to the Regional Museums Task Force

The Biology Curators Group is a group of Museum professionals who are responsible for the care, display and interpretation of natural history collections. We are dedicated to their better care maintenance and use.

The group is managed by a committee consisting of officers and committee members who discuss and comment upon topical subjects and published reports, advises the Museums Association on matters concerning biological collections and curators, formulates BCG policy, liaises with other groups with common aims (NSCG, GCG, SPNHC, SHNH) and monitors biological collections reported to be at risk through disposal or neglect. Current membership is over 350 individual and institutional members, most from the UK and some overseas.

Our Objectives:

We aim to raise awareness on issues of national importance with particular reference to the continued support of biological collections and their curators.

The following comments follow on from a special meeting of the Biology Curators Group where opinions of the membership were sought for this response. A draft was subsequently circulated for comment and further views sought.

Unified Vision

The Regional Museums Task Forces remit of developing a unified vision for museums is to be welcomed. There are however an number of concerns and issues which need to be taken into account.

There is not, and should not be, one 'solution' applied across all types of museums and collections. What may be beneficial for art collections may not be applicable to biological collections. The 'one size fits all' approach while tempting in creating a unified vision, will ultimately weaken some elements of

museums collections at the expense of others. Different collections are utilised and accessed in different ways and hence require different responses, they have different requirements, objectives and uses.

Similarly all museums services are different. They are wed to local history, politics and culture and as such have their own idiosyncrasies which make that museum a unique experience. Within these museums the collections are similarly different to other institutions of comparable age, size and structure. Best Value has already led to some degree of homogeneity as museums seek comparators and benchmarks with which to measure their service. To try and apply the same standard and vision to biology, art geology, social history etc collections is a sure recipe for disaster. This is not an argument against rigorous standards to which museum services should aspire conform to, rather it is a reflection of the diverse nature of collections and the way museums have developed. The Museums & Galleries registration scheme and Standards in the Care of Collections are two such standards, which while rigorous, and certainly demanding to achieve the higher levels of care, did not impose a sweeping conformity across different institutions and services.

Any unified vision must be crafted in such a way so as to enable and allow each museum service to maintain its own identity, individuality and idiosyncrasies, and continue to develop as local priorities and needs permit, rather than have to develop into some identikit museum providing exactly the same services, exhibitions, IT access, educational and outreach provision, staffing structure and collections. There is a strong case for museums signing up to and following common standards in areas such as collections care and documentation for example, but not at the expense of the museums own identity.

Access

The fundamental concern with regard to museum biological collections is one of access. This does not simply mean being able to see all of a particular museums collections, rather it is how access, physical, cultural and scientific, is enabled. Consider the numbers. A

large art collection might be just a few thousand items (the National Gallery has only around 2300 paintings). An average local authority museum collection has perhaps 20,000 items. A large regional museum such as Bristol, Leicester, Nottingham or Brighton, may between 250,000 to 1.2 million. The statement that 'over 95% of items not on display' is therefore a misapprehension of the nature of access. There is no conceivable way in which people could take in this number of specimens, even if they could "see" them what kind of experience and understanding would they come away with? If all you can say after the event is that you "saw a lot of things in the museum", then there is no practical outcome to that form of access.

Enabling effective access therefore demands practical outcomes. This raises a number of questions. Who wants access? Why? What does access mean? In what ways can access be achieved? How are collections used?

In broad terms, access to collections means being able to gain benefits from them. This can be done in many ways, of which exhibition and display are probably the most obvious. Other ways may include:

- Exhibition and display (permanent, temporary, travelling)
- Electronic access via web pages, databases, virtual displays
- Physical access to stored collections
- Access to archives of images of the objects, preferably with accompanying data
- Books, catalogues and computer based media derived from the collections
- Access to expert curatorial and collections knowledge
- Attendance at workshops that make use of the collections
- As a resource in providing an enquiries and information service
- As a resource for local naturalists, schools, further and higher education and lifelong learning groups

For those objects that are used, or need to be available for access for any of the above purposes, there is a need for them to be easily

available to the curator in the first instance, and for the relevant data to be available with them. This means being reasonably close to hand and well documented. For them to continue to be accessible over a long term, they need to be in good quality storage. And for them to be useful, and therefore called upon, they need to be relevant and appropriately supported. This, again, means being well documented, and being in an appropriate historical, cultural and geographical context, with the appropriate expertise to hand to enable all this to be used.

Different users have different needs, for example local naturalists will need access to local material, visiting specialists need access to species groups across the whole collection, schools and colleges may need access to local, national and international material. It is difficult to predict what elements of a collection may be used by any one user group, their needs are many and varied and expanding.

Nevertheless, it is true that some museum objects are rarely used in any way. This is often because they are poorly documented, a result of there being insufficient resources available to rectify this situation within a short timeframe. This is a particular issue with biological collections which may contain hundreds of thousands, and in some cases millions, of objects. Nevertheless, the great majority of museums are actively working to rectify this situation, thus enabling potential access in the long term.

Recommendations

Develop regional superstores, where all the collections can be brought together. This has a number of benefits:

People will only have to go to one place for in order to get access to museum services.

It may provide a focal point for marketing and raising public awareness.

The economies of scale may enable a concentration of appropriate resources, such as are not available to individual museum services.

However, there are a number of disadvantages:

The concentration of resources has been a function of Area Museum Councils in the past, though at present this is rarely the case, as finances have been withdrawn to the point where the AMCs cannot maintain these services, even where they have been notably successful. Which begs the question, will regional superstores be any more successful in obtaining finance?

Regular access is only effectively available to those people in the locale of the store. It is also dependant on users from the wider region having access to a car or the store being near reliable and regular public transport.

Many people visit local museums for local information on their doorstep. They are less likely to do so if the museum is in another town

Material is much less likely to be donated to non-local collections

Centralisation of collections will result in the closure of local museums

A regional centre is unlikely to be able to cater for the local needs, or to cater for the number of people regionally in the detail provided by local services

The logistics of moving curators and objects between local and regional centres will be untenable

The maintenance of expertise in the collection and interpretation of local heritage will be lost

A major incident could result in the entire loss of the region's collections

The net effect of all the disadvantages above will be an overall loss of local heritage and a severe reduction in access for the greater majority of potential users. However, a modification of this proposal could be:

Develop the role of the AMC's.
This would involve reinstating the concentration of resources within the AMC's. AMC's would become providers of advice peripatetic curatorial and conservation services and act as grant giving bodies, distributing funds according to national and regional priorities.

Develop major regional museums as regional centres of excellence

Many of the largest and most important collections are located in major regional museums (though not exclusively). These major regional museums also generally have the main concentration of curatorial staff. Funding could be used to increase curatorial expertise within these centres concentrating on documenting and upgrading storage conditions and access. This would be a fairly cost efficient way of improving and enabling access to a large proportion of biological collections in the UK. This increase in curatorial expertise could also then be used to support other museums in the region through curatorial advice and curatorial and conservation projects perhaps funded through the AMC's. Many of the problems currently faced by existing museum services are the result of bad, or at least uninformed, practice in the past, along with present day starvation of funds and the resources thereby made available. Well targeted additional funding directed at this part of the problem would go a long way towards achieving the desired aims. Increasing curatorial and conservation expertise must be seen as a priority. If we do not know what we have in our collections and be able to store them correctly we will be unable to access and use them effectively as a resource for life long learning, social inclusion, scientific research and cultural enrichment.

Conclusion

It must be understood that the crucial problem is that there is currently not enough money to do the tasks required. It will not matter which solution or solutions are selected if there is still not enough money to make them work.

Local and national government objectives for lifelong long learning, outreach and social inclusion can only be met if we can enable effective access to our collections. This will take time and money to address the fundamental problems of poor documentation, poor and inadequate storage and declining specialist curatorial and conservation expertise. Only when the basic collections management functions are adequately catered for will we be able to make possible the full access the many and varied user groups want and deserve.