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content about the animal specimens within the conversations of their visitors, school or family. That about which people speak is an indicator of the content of their thinking, which in turn reflects the topics about which they are interested.

Museums should build on this deeper observational level of activity amongst their visitors compared to the zoo experience and develop the observation of animal specimens into a learning encounter, based on the observations that we now know these visitors, primary school and family groups, generate.

It is however of interest that the basic pattern of content of comments is so similar, indicating that the visitors share a basic concept of animals about which they comment when observing animal exhibits, be it in a natural history museum or zoo. The challenge is to use this foundation of knowledge and construct the knowledge and understanding of visitors using the messages of the museum.

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Collecting Under Contract: Balancing The Needs Of Museum Reference Collections And The Requirements Of The 'Client'.

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Introduction

Museums are increasingly seeking to generate additional income through commercial contract work. This type of work often necessitates the collection and examination of comparatively large quantities of material. With staff shortages and limited resources being an issue in virtually all museums, there are obviously a number of important factors that need to be taken into consideration, ideally before such work is taken on. This paper examines the results of a staff discussion held in the Department of Zoology at the Natural History Museum (NHM) about increasing curatorial involvement in contract and consultancy work. The NHM's national cetacean strandings contract is used to illustrate the benefits and drawbacks of such work.

Discussion

In the year 2000, the Department of Zoology at the NHM generated a net figure of £176,000 through its involvement with contract work. By the end of 2001, 27 contracts were either ongoing, planned or had been completed. Curatorial involvement with contract work in the Department of Zoology is widespread, with every division in the Department committing some staff resources in one form or another. Contracts are an inescapable part of the Department's work and are increasingly important to the NHM as a whole, particularly in light of the recent changes to government funding, such as removal of admissions charges etc. The Contracts Group (known officially as Facilities and Services) exists as a separate body within the Department of Zoology and is responsible for seeking out and maintaining scientific and commercial contract work. As they are not directly linked to the organisation of curation or collections management within the Department, this is where logistical problems can occur.

As a result of talking to curators and collection managers across the Department, the following points were made regarding involvement with contract work:

Advantages (apart from financial):

- Contract/consultancy work can be viewed as a mechanism for staff development.
- It can help to develop your knowledge of a particular taxonomic group and expand your identification skills.
- It offers the opportunity to take on further training
- It allows you to become directly involved in fieldwork.
- It allows you to utilise the knowledge and training you came to the Museum with (e.g. biology, zoology and other related subjects), or that you have acquired since working at the Museum.
- It adds to overall job satisfaction and can give you the feeling that you are actively contributing to potentially important areas of research and conservation work.
- It can lead to useful collaborations in other areas not directly associated with a specific contract, and may provide the opportunity to generate publications.
- It can lead to the acquisition of new material for the collections, and allow us to collect in geographical areas we may not otherwise have access to.
- It can not only help raise the public profile of the Museum, but also in the scientific community and in the media.

Disadvantages:

- The work is very time-consuming.
- It can seriously impact upon core curation activities.
- Often, involvement in contract work is poorly timetabled, with unrealistic deadlines set.
- It can be extremely stressful.
- It can lead to the acquisition of bulk samples or collections that ultimately become the responsibility of the curators.
- Holding such collections for the duration of the analyses can place demands on valuable storage space.
- Curation of material acquired from contract work can be problematic and very time-consuming, with the necessary data needed for proper accession and incorporation often difficult to extract from published reports and field data (e.g. it may have been collected/recorded in a way that is inconsistent with Museum requirements).
- There needs to be greater liaison between the contracts manager and collection managers in those instances where it is anticipated that curatorial input will be

required to complete a job, or in fact to take a job on in the first place.

- We cannot carry out contract work effectively if our reference collections are split between South Kensington (main site) and Wandsworth (NHM's off-site storage facility)

Case study

The UK Cetacean Strandings contract awarded to the NHM by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in 1990, generates the largest single annual income for the Department of Zoology. This work (originally begun by the Museum in 1913) occasionally places great demands on curatorial staff time and other resources. Aside from the financial benefits, the strandings programme allows us to obtain specimens for the Museum's research collections, helps us to improve our exhibitions and develop public understanding of marine science and biodiversity at all levels.

When a stranded cetacean is reported to the NHM, as much information as possible is obtained over the telephone on the precise location, species, size and condition of the animal. If the animal is dead, a decision is made on whether to collect the carcass for detailed examination by veterinary surgeons (under the supervision of the Institute of Zoology at London Zoo), to conduct a post-mortem investigation on the beach, to retrieve material for the Museum or to arrange for the immediate disposal of the carcass. Cetacean stranding information is collated and entered into the Natural History Museum's national strandings database, which is then used to produce distribution maps and information about the biology and ecology of each species. These are presented as regular reports for DEFRA, the Welsh National Assembly, and when suitable are published in the scientific press. The Museum's strandings database holds all reports made from 1913 to the present day, and this information is now being made available over the internet.

Of course, strandings are very unpredictable and can often occur in large numbers. However, trained staff within the Department of Zoology have to be found who can attend strandings at very short notice. This may involve tense negotiations with line-managers and result in an absence from the Museum of one or more days. Additionally, on return, preparation and examination of samples obtained from the strandings episode can prove difficult to fit in to an already heavy work schedule.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, staff time is precious and resources are thinly spread. My own time is not devoted 100% to co-ordination of the national strandings programme, making it difficult to balance this with other curatorial work. The internal discussion exercise clearly highlighted a number of shared concerns that curatorial staff at all levels, have in the Department of Zoology. Accepting that involvement in contract work was an increasing part of their work, it was felt that the following points should be considered by all parties concerned at the outset:

- Do you have the time (realistically) to take on and complete the work by the given deadline?

- Do you have the staff and other resources (tools, reference materials, suitable storage and examination space etc) to carry out the work?

- Have you considered the impact of introducing the 'contract' material into the museum environment (pest control, health and safety, space constraints)?

- Have you liased with the museum's collections manager/curator(s) regarding all of the above?

- Have you drafted a 'collections impact statement' if the contract material is to be subsequently accessioned into the main museum collections?

These points represent desired 'good practice', and may seem like common sense to most. However, past experience has taught us that common sense and good practice can often be brushed aside in the rush to secure financially attractive contract work. Hopefully, the results of this discussion exercise may prove thought provoking to those responsible for the care and maintenance of other museum reference collections.

To report a stranded whale, dolphin or porpoise, please telephone the NHM on: 020 7942 5155

How do you Value Specimens?

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This article talks about the way we value specimens. I see science as our "legitimate" valuation of specimens, the way we describe officially their value to our funding bodies. Specimens are scientific documents linked to a specialist theory, Taxonomy. My premise is that there is more to specimens than science, there are other ways of relating to specimens. I see a problem in that specimens are no longer seen as the central interpretative tool for exhibitions. In the Predators exhibition at the Natural History Museum (NHM) the designers have placed animatronic models at the centre of the exhibition rather than specimens. The exhibition is good and there are some very interesting specimens on display but they exist as examples rather than the focus.

For my MA in Museum Studies entitled; A neorenaissance episteme for the natural history specimen: Breaking the fixity of "legitimate" valuation, I interviewed staff at the Natural History Museum. I asked them how they valued specimens, for their subjective opinion, their personal feelings. I found the most spontaneous responses from people when they described behind the scenes tours.

> "I love the specimens but that's me, I love working here, I think others wouldn't give a monkey's [sic]... I'm curious,... they're beautiful, even the ugly ones,... amazing we've got them... I suppose maybe average people who came into the Museum... might think 'that's a dodo' (meaning that it is nothing)... a sterile animal... just a scientific object... I don't, I see them as totally amazing, that you can look at them in complete detail... I love to show them to people" (NS, administrators, NHM).

The above is a quote from someone who works in museums but not with specimens. I think that it is revealing that the word "just" is used to describe a scientific object, it suggests that there is more. I suggest that there are clues to how we value specimens in the relationship between behind the scenes tours and exhibitions. We need to give the audience more points of access into specimens, encouraging a social, an aesthetic and an emotional response, incorporating "alternative" value systems that seem so present in behind the scenes tours, and whilst doing so legitimise these alternative value systems.

Social values are becoming more appreciated and legitimised particularly with respect to social history. Exhibitions such as the Voyages of Discovery at the NHM are an example of this, where specimens can be put on display for being themselves, significant as historic objects. Yet the social also includes the personal or sentimental attachment to specimens. Do you know anyone who doesn't have a favourite specimen? Guy the gorilla is a brilliant example of how relationships can exits between people and scientific documents. Guy was a notorious character at London Zoo, smoking people's cigarettes and eating their ice creams until 1978 when he died. He was transferred to the NHM but although the NHM waited until 1982 before trying to display him, there was public uproar due to people's feelings for Guy and he was put away out of sight. I occasionally come