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the subject of the event, the whole collection soon receives attention. It would probably be possible to produce the "Large Lichen Show" and still attract visitors and resources because of previous successes and the attraction of children's activities ("paint your favourite lichen", "fungus face painting", "pipe cleaner bryophytes"!).

By providing specific projects within the collections the half-term events easily attract grant aid. There are so many benefits for public, museum and collections alike that such well defined projects delight Area Museum Councils and other sponsoring bodies. At Sheffield, grants have been used to provide the manpower for the initial curation of specimens or for new storage facilities and collections access after the event.

Despite the hard work involved in producing a "nine day wonder" it is a short lived added pressure on the curator. A month or two of planning and preparation provides the space and resources to work on the basics of curation and collection management for the rest of the year (or half year if you do two!).

Other incidental benefits include the sparking of visitors' interest in natural history and the generation of biological records. It can be very successful to undertake a mapping scheme of particularly well known animals during a show. Records are instantly forthcoming as pins in a map-board. The presence of a computer with the biological records database provides immediate feedback.

A final benefit from undertaking such short-lived shows at regular intervals is that they act as constant reminders to Councillors, Area Services and other museum staff of the popularity of natural history. They justify the existence of our collections within the museum. Sadly such justification is often necessary. The importance, value and fascination of natural history specimens and associated staff expertise become highlighted in a coldly economic setting.

For Sheffield Museum the next step is an extended event from February half-term to Easter 1996. Using the existing galleries as a venue and bringing in paid demonstrators to lighten the burden on the curators. It will be another step closer to the Liverpool Natural History Centre with much more in the way of interactive technology. Already the show has provided justification for the purchase of two multimedia PCs and associated CD ROM packages, another TV and video player, a 10 drawer insect cabinet, a storage unit for molluscs, a microscope and light source, and new tables and chairs.

At the time when budgetary crises could easily have put an end to any display work and outreach the temporary shows have brought new life – and money – into the Natural History section. Instead of withdrawing into our shells (!) and waiting for the inevitable redundancies the positive approach of promoting our collection assets in a simple and inexpensive way has improved both collection care and public enjoyment of the museum.

Where we were once trying to keep our heads above water we are now able to surf on the backs of our "dusty old collections"!

THE UNIDROIT CONVENTION 1995 : ITS POSSIBLE EFFECT ON UK NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum

Introduction

In Rome in June 1995 diplomatic representatives of 70

countries adopted a draft Unidroit (the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. The United Kingdom was an official participant in this Conference. The full Convention runs to 21 Articles and one Annex; this note is just to alert BCG members to the possible significance of the signing. Judging by the amount of discussion on the Internet, our American cousins are already considerably stirred up about the Convention and its possible effects.

What it covers

Article 1 states: "This Convention applies to claims of an international character for:

- a) the restitution of stolen cultural objects;
- b) the return of cultural objects removed from the territory of a Contracting State contrary to its law regulating the export of cultural objects for the purpose of protecting its cultural heritage."

Article 2 states: "For the purposes of this Convention, cultural objects are those which ... are of importance for ... science and belong to one of the categories in the Annex of this Convention."

The Annex [Definitions of Cultural Property under the Convention] has fourteen categories and the *first listed* of these is:

- "a) Rare collections and specimens of fauna, flora, minerals and anatomy, and objects of palaeontological interest."

Thus all natural science specimens (with the possible exception of petrology?) come very much within the purview of the Convention.

Article 3 (7) states: "for the purposes of this Convention a "public collection" consists of a group of inventoried or otherwise identified cultural objects owned by:

- a) a Contracting State
- b) a regional or local authority of a Contracting State
- d) an institution that is established for an essentially cultural, educational or scientific purpose in a Contracting State and is recognised in that State as serving the public interest."

[which would seem to catch most of us!]

What might it mean?

This is difficult to judge at the moment. It is unclear how soon, if at all, the UK Parliament will ratify the Convention; however, there is also the question of what the European Parliament will do about it and whether their decision would affect the UK.

At its worst this Convention will allow any country to decide that any well known specimen *or collection* was illegally exported originally and so demand its restitution. The maximum time limit quoted in the Convention is 75 years, although 50 years is the norm, and the Convention specifically includes material stolen (or 'collected' as we have always said) before the Convention is in place. However, Article 3 (4) says that "... a claim for restitution of a cultural object ... belonging to a public collection, shall not be subject to time limitations other than a period of three years from the time when the claimant knew the location of the cultural object and the identity of its possessor". I *think* this means that they can claim a collection no matter *when* it came to this country, provided they do it within three years of the Convention being adopted. Incidentally, it also applies to objects on loan that are not returned on time!

The matter would then have to go to a UK (or possibly a European) court, but the onus would be on the present owner to prove that they obtained it legally. In the event of the court ordering the return of the object then the 'possessor' can claim compensation, although I suspect this would then lead to another court case in the returnee country and probably would be a waste of time.

What should we do about it?

I recommend all curators get a copy of this Convention, and make sure your director and/or committee chair sees a copy. I printed mine off from the World Wide Web, but all the Area Museum Services should have copies available. The BCG Committee will be asked to discuss the Convention, so please let us have your views. It may be necessary to follow the American lead and start lobbying MPs and Ministers to see that they are fully aware of the possible consequences for the cultural life of this country should they gaily ratify the Convention as it stands. In view of the international importance of this matter it may be a time when we should collaborate with both our European counterparts, where they exist, and with SPNHC, to ensure that common sense prevails.

THE ALTERNATIVE 'BEETLE DOWN' LEAFLET

The scurrilous leaflet reproduced in this issue had a mercifully limited circulation some years ago; mercifully limited because had it gained widespread credence it might have stopped all those nice people who come to see us bringing interesting things like the elephant hawkmoth caterpillars without which no curator's day is really complete. Just think, if these so welcome visitors were to stay away we would have to fall back on doing boring things like fieldwork or research to fill our time – yuk!!

A SUMMARY OF THE CARE & PREVENTATIVE CONSERVATION OF SUB-FOSSIL BONE FOR THE NON-SPECIALIST OR

PLEISTOCENE PROBLEMS – THE SUB-FOSSIL SCENARIO :

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Introduction

This paper is intended as a summary of the formation, occurrence and conservation problems associated with sub-fossil bone for the non-specialist working on British collections with suggestions for preventative conservation.

The text was first produced as a talk followed by a demonstration of conservation packing techniques for the Biology Curator's Group meeting in Chester in February of 1995. The demonstration showed a number of techniques for mount making, developed from conservation packing techniques learnt at the Horniman Museum (Watkinson, 1987) and at a CCI mount making workshop lead by Carl Schlichting.

Since presenting this paper, two relevant publications have become available. The CCI Technical Bulletin no 14 "Working with Polyethylene Foam and Fluted Plastic Sheet" (Schlichting 1994), is an excellent and well illustrated description of tools, materials and methods for mount

making, based on the workshop. "The care and conservation of Palaeontological Material" edited by Collins (1995) includes a chapter by Shelton & Johnson on "Conservation of sub-fossil bone", describing the formation processes of sub-fossil bone in detail and current and historical aspects of excavation, preparation and conservation treatments.

Definition of sub-fossil bone

Sub-fossil bone is bone that has been weathered to some extent and then buried. Following burial, some of the mineral part of the bone (hydroxyapatite) and some of the organic content of the bone (including the structural protein, collagen) are leached away, the amount of leaching depends on the burial conditions, leaving a weakened bone perhaps saturated with hygroscopic salts. Sub-fossil bone is closer in appearance to modern bone than fully mineralised bone.

In true fossilised bones the organic content is replaced with apatite or calcite leading to a very heavy solid specimen with cancellous areas normally filled with mineralisation. True fossilised bone breaks smoothly, modern bone breaks to leave a fibrous surface. Sub-fossil bone breaks without leaving a fibrous surface but is not mineralised, broken surfaces are easily worn down during deposition.

Age

Sub-fossil bone is found in deposits of Quaternary age, the period made up of the Pleistocene which began about 3 million years ago and ended about 10,000 years ago and continuing into the Holocene, from 10,000 years ago to the present day. Since excavated Holocene material is nearly always the realm of archaeologists, this paper will deal with bone of Pleistocene age.

Q	Holocene	Fens & Levels
U A T E R	Upper Pleistocene	Kent's Cavern Kirkdale Joint Mintnor Barrington Raised beaches
R N E	Middle Pleistocene	Swanscombe Cromer Tills Cromer Forest Beds
R Y	Lower Pleistocene	Weybourne Crag Dove Holes Cave Norwich Crag Red Crag

Table 1 – A simplified table of Quaternary deposits

Types of deposit and species found in British museum collections

Sub-fossil material from the Lower, Middle and Upper Pleistocene, a period that included both warm interglacial and cold glacial periods is found in British museum collections. Typical Pleistocene deposit names include Drift, River Terrace, Raised Beach, Till, Cave Earth, Cromer Forest Beds, Norwich & Red Crag. (See table 1)

Bone from the Red Crag and older deposits are normally partially mineralised and therefore do not exhibit typical sub-fossil bone conservation problems. Problems only seems to develop in specimens from the Norwich Crag of the Lower Pleistocene and younger deposits.

The following animals are commonly represented in British deposits; hyaena, cave bear, wild boar, mammoth,