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methodology, options, costings, fundraising and marketing, and no doubt other factors as well. Members of the working party are likely to include representatives from the Museums and Galleries Commission, the Department of National Heritage, the Area Museum Councils, the Biology and Geology Curators Groups, the Natural Sciences Conservation Group, the Collections Research Units, the Museums Association, and perhaps the institutions themselves. It needs to be recognised, however, that the larger the group gets the less effective it is likely to be. The working party might expect to meet two or three times a year, and one could not expect a useful result in less than a year.

One final point, on the subject of names. It has been pointed out that the use of the term orphan is perhaps unwise, especially as the aim to promote the long term care of collections, even where successful, does not necessarily mean they will gain their own specialist curator. It may well be more appropriate, therefore, to drop the term orphan and take the initiative forward from the perspective of putting in place minimum standards of care for collections, across the board, but with particular reference to those that are currently without specialist care at present. And so to the report.

A Report of the BCG / GCG Orphan Collections Working Party

Steve Thompson, Scunthorpe Museum

Introduction

In September 1994, a seminar was organised at the Museums Association (MA) conference, by the Biology Curators' Group (BCG) and Geological Curators' Group (GCG), to address the problem of the many natural science collections in the UK that do not have professionally trained curators.

If collections are uncurated they are effectively inaccessible. The museum loses part of its basic resource while the scientific community loses valuable data. The collections are likely to deteriorate, making them progressively more difficult to bring back into use. The status quo is not being maintained by simply doing nothing.

Among the recommendations made at the 1994 seminar was that a report should be produced to summarise the findings made by a joint working party, with a view to generating activity. This report looks at the extent of the problem, the way it has been tackled so far, the reasons for acting, some possible solutions and, finally, makes a number of recommendations.

Some Standards, Codes and Guidelines

Numerous documents have been published within the last ten years indicating a commitment to the care of all the collections within our museums as part of a national resource and our collective cultural heritage. These include:

Museums Association (MA):

Code of conduct for museum professionals.
Code of practice for museum authorities.

Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC):

Registration scheme.

Guidelines for the care of collections. (Geology, Biology).

Geological Curators' Group:

Guidelines for the care of geological collections.

Museum Documentation Association (MDA):

SPECTRUM.

Collections Research Units:

Regional surveys and reports on natural science collections.

The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections

Geological Society.

Why Care

a) Specimens and collections are important even when they lose their curator. Some material (eg. type material) is irreplaceable.

b) All collections, curated or otherwise, are part of a national resource and our national heritage.

c) It is difficult to define the future importance of the material in our care.

e) The ability to use a collection depends on good curation. Owners will attach more importance to a well cared for collection that can be used.

f) The profession has stated a commitment to the national resource of collections by publishing standards, codes and guidelines.

History

The Extent of the Problem

Two reports, "The State and Status of Geological Collections in the UK" (Geol. Soc, 1981) and "Biological Collections UK" (MA, 1987) already provide an overview of the problem. The regional Collections Research Units (CRU's) have also assessed both the extent and the nature of the problems.

Biological Collections UK (MA 1987)

a) 35% of museums with biological collections have no staff trained in biological curation.

b) 1 - 2.5 million specimens are estimated to be without specialist curatorial cover (orphanised).

c) At least 30% of institutions hold type or figured material.

d) Around 50% of orphan collection institutions still receive natural history material.

The peripatetic geology curators for the South East Area Service (1985 - 1995) surveyed all the museums in that region. They found that 1.5 million geological specimens were without curatorial cover and that 186,000 were in need of remedial conservation.

A comprehensive CRU project in the North West found, after surveying 61 institutions with natural science material, that 29 museums had no natural science curator and 4 had no curator / skilled carer at all. This corresponds to roughly 270,000 specimens.

If the North West is a reasonable average for the UK as a whole, but weighting the figures for the SE, we get a national total of around 5 million specimens, with 370,000 in need of remedial conservation.

Past Strategies

Peripatetic curators. These have usually been attached to area museums councils, (AMC's), such as in the North East and South East, and always on a temporary basis.

Volunteers. Many are very competent and committed, but quality cannot be guaranteed if there is no qualified curator to supervise their efforts.

Community programme and work experience schemes draw upon inexperienced people and with little hope of long term commitment. Again proper supervision is required for quality assurance.

Freelance workers. Suitably qualified and experienced people are taken on for a limited period of time, to do very specific tasks, on a one-off basis. This does not cater for the long term needs of the collections but should at least promote the status quo.

A part solution has been for groups such as CRU's to offer advice, allowing museums to put out work without having to be able to put in the initial evaluation effort themselves.

The principle problem with all such schemes has been the lack of consistency, continuity and long term provision for the collections.

Future Solutions

There are many possible options. Many of the attempts so far have been on an individual, independent and ad hoc basis, and it seems apparent that these will not serve as a long term solution to the problems. A more unified regional or national scheme is needed and we feel that the best long-term option is likely to be a major national initiative, though is not the purpose of this report to describe such a scheme.

It is expected that the work would be carried out by existing operators, such as AMC's, CRU's, volunteers, etc, making the initiative an umbrella for many small projects. This should promote the flexibility and adaptability of individual solutions. Any help offered would be conditional on the receiving institution guaranteeing the long term maintenance of the collections. The use of the collections should also be promoted as part of the package.

Ideally, all collections, not just natural science collections, should be catered for. However, natural science represents a more or less self contained set of collections and expertise, is large enough for economies of scale to be significant, but small enough to act as a potential pilot project, to be later developed for other subject areas.

Reasons for a national initiative

1) Greater weight. A 'single' scheme is more likely to gain the support of a wider range of backers, such as MGC, MA, AMC's, CRU's, specialist groups and institutions, as well as being more likely to gain the attention of central government.

2) It acts as a focus for raising the profile and improving the image of the profession.

3) It avoids the splitting of support for initiatives.

4) It has greater marketing potential. Given a name, a logo, objectives, an action plan, etc, it is more likely to attract sponsorship.

5) The network would act as an information gathering and distribution network, perhaps supported by newsletter, and provide a database for marketing and research purposes. Small or remote institutions would find such support particularly helpful.

6) A common scheme would enable the use of national standards and promote consistency of results.

Solutions for individual collections

1) Employ a full time, qualified professional natural science curator. In some instances a good case could be made for this, on the basis of providing a natural science service to the public and realising the full value of the collections.

2) Shared curatorial services. This may come down to a formal agreement between a group of museums to jointly employ a peripatetic curator.

3) Use of freelance workers.

4) Ad hoc and informal use of curators from neighbouring institutions.

5) Programs of voluntary work. These would have to be very well prepared before work began to ensure that useful results were gained from the effort.

6) Transfer of Collections. This is an option that the registration scheme considers, when this represents the best interests of the collection.

Summary and Recommendations

Summary

It is clear that a substantial proportion of our heritage of museum collections is currently in a state of abandonment. Because such collections have no specialist care, they are undervalued, under used and poorly appreciated.

Some of this material is of international importance and much is of regional importance. The piecemeal efforts to protect individual collections, while very worthy, have not made a significant impact on the situation as a whole. If this material is to be protected, a concerted effort on the part of the museum community is needed.

A national scheme, on which individual collections managers will be encouraged to call for help, is likely to be the most effective way of dealing with the larger scale problem.

Recommendations

- 1) That a national scheme be designed that will bring about effective action on orphan collections.
- 2) That a new working party be set up, suitable for bringing this about and putting it into action.

The Working Party

This report was produced, the background work carried out and seminars organised by a working party comprised of the following members:

Chris Collins, Conservation Labs, University of Cambridge

John Cooper, Booth Museum, Brighton

Rosemary Roden, freelance curatorial consultant

Mark Simmons, Perth Museum

Simon Timberlake, South East Museums Service

Steve Thompson, Scunthorpe Museum

References and Further Reading**Biology Curators Group**

Biological Collections UK

Museums Association, 1987

Collections Research Units

Skeletons in the Cupboard: The report of the North West Collections Research Unit.

North West Museums Service, in press.

All the regions have produced a register of natural science collections within the region but these have rarely contained more than a passing reference to the state of the collections, although the information was recorded in the surveys of the collections.

Geology Curators Group

The State and Status of Geological Collections in the UK
Geological Society of London, 1981

Guidelines for the care of Geological Collections
Geological Society of London, 1985

The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections;
Proceedings of the 1995 International Conference.

Geological Society of London, 1997

(Published on behalf of Geology Curators Group and Biology Curators Group)

Knell, S.J, Taylor, M.A. and Roden, R.

Geology and the Area Museum Service

Area museum Service for South East England, (Now SEMS), 1987

Museums Association

Code of Conduct for People Who Work in Museums
Museums Association, 1997.

Code of Practice for Museum Governing Bodies
Museums Association, 1997.

The above two documents are available free of charge from the Museums Association.

WORLDWIDE WEB SITES

Please send in any favourite sites, useful sites or just plain funny sites of interest to natural science curators.

Roadkill Quarterly - an impressive site, terrific recipes for all those critters once their details have been logged on Recorder! It's at :

<http://www.collideoscope.com/rkq/>

For biodiversity try :

<http://www.biologie.uni-freiburg.de/data/zoology/riede/taxalinks.html>

botany links -

<http://ifs.plants.ox.ac.uk/blinks.htm>

other links pages at the above can be accessed from

<http://ifs.plants.ox.ac.uk>

*Dave Anderson, Natural History Centre,
Towneley Hall Museum, Burnley*

THE HISTORICAL MEDICAL EQUIPMENT SOCIETY

The Society was formed in September 1996 at a meeting of collectors and museum curators, and a steering group was elected under the chairmanship of Mr John Kirkup, FRCS.

The objectives have yet to be finalised, but will include :

- To provide opportunities for meetings to discuss medical instruments and equipment.
- To promote the study of the development of medical equipment from ancient times to the present.
- To provide a forum for discussion between many small specialist groups around the country.
- To publish a newsletter and, in due course, a journal.
- To arrange visits to museums and private collections.

Membership is open to all, including those with special interests in medical, surgical, pharmacy, dental and pathology instruments and equipment.

Expressions of interest are sought from all who share our enthusiasm.

An inaugural meeting is planned for Spring 1997 in London.

The steering group comprises :

Mr John Kirkup (Chairman), Dr David Warren (Secretary), Mrs Sue Weir, Dr Marios Kyriazis, Mr John Maynard.

The address for all correspondence is : The Secretary, 77 Carmarthen Avenue, Portsmouth PO6 2AG. Fax : 01705 201479. E-mail : 101767.2756@compuserve.com

Museums Documentation Association

SPECTRUM: A standard for museum documentation.
Museums Documentation Association, 1994.

Museums and Galleries Commission

A Registration Scheme for Museums, Phases 1 and 2.
Museums and Galleries Commission, 1988, 1995.
Guidelines in the Care of Biological Collections
Museums and Galleries Commission, 1992.
Guidelines in the Care of Geological Collections
Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993.

Simmons, M

Discovering Green Treasures
North of England Museums Service, 1993.

Timberlake, S.

A preliminary Report of the Travelling Geology Curator
Area museum Service for South East England, (Now
SEMS), 1987.
The Interim report of the travelling Geology Curator
Area museum Service for South East England, (Now
SEMS), 1989.

BIOLOGICAL RECORDING CELL REPORT

Steve Garland - Bolton Museum, Art Gallery & Aquarium

The Millennium bid has unfortunately failed, as announced to the bid team on the 4th of February. Every BCG member should have received a copy of the latest summary of the LRC section. In the period up to then, most records centres have taken the opportunity to discuss possible consortium structures with other organisations. Rather than establishing new stand-alone LRCs in each county, most seem to be looking at networking existing resources. Now that the Millennium Bid is no more, it is up to organisations such as the BCG and NFBR to try to develop some of the ideas further.

The Internet is still a rather slow and unreliable way of networking information, but the continuing development of better telephone lines (including ISDN links), faster modems and faster computers will result in steady improvements. The political implications of establishing new LRCs or centralising existing resources are significant. The key to the successful development of biological recording nationally is networking at a local and national level. A major benefit of a successful bid would have been the addressing of universal problems relating to such things as Data Quality, Copyright, Accreditation Standards, standards for access to data, charging policies and software compatibility. These are still vitally important issues which will need resolving before any real national or regional networking can take place.

Local Agenda 21 and Biodiversity issues are a strong lever to support LRCs. In the North West of England there are discussions continuing at several levels about how to approach biodiversity. Many Boroughs are developing Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs), but most are realising that a county or regional perspective is necessary for many aspects. Most counties are approaching BAPs at that level, but a North West Biodiversity Steering Group has been formed to take a regional view. This will be especially important for organisms which are poorly known. It may be impossible to assemble meaningful data at a county or borough level. Everyone is quickly realising that LRCs provide the best hope of collating the vast quantities of data needed. BAPs are not a 'one-off' thing, but require monitoring and adapting continuously. LRCs are vital for this development and should capitalise on the opportunities presented. Co-ordination of LRCs and national data sets would help to provide a complete picture of the current knowledge of our fauna and flora.

The BCG meeting in Nottingham was well attended and a number of interesting presentations examined biological recording and its relationship with collections. Graham Walley will present more details in the next Biology Curator. BCG will be working with NFBR to drive forward several museum LRC interests. The meeting agreed a resolution for BCG and NFBR to pursue creation of an Advisory Board to supervise Biological Recording - more on these developments in future issues.

If you are discussing developments in your county, please let me know what is happening; even if it is just a short letter, fax or e-mail. I want to try to develop a clear picture of museum LRCs and developments nationally. In the North West we have set up a NW Recorder User Group, which already seems to be discussing issues wider than just the use of Recorder. Has anyone else done the same thing?

Although there will be no Millennium funding, I think that the excitement that the Bid generated in the field of biological recording must be harnessed to ensure the future development of a national network, by some means.

BRISC

BIOLOGICAL RECORDING IN SCOTLAND CAMPAIGN

FROM David Mellor, Chair of BRISC.

Dear Pals

Following the news of the NBM bid's demise and taking into account our organisation's desires to be treated as (more) equal partners in any future initiatives I am writing to make the following points.

1. Between them, our organisations contain a substantial, if not complete, representation of LRCs. It is essential that we collectively help to catalyse the formation of an organisation that does properly represent LRCs as soon as constitutionally possible. This point has been endorsed by BRISC and, I think, by the membership of the other organisations. The role of the CCBR should be examined as part of this.