The Biology Curator

Title: Identification Qualifications- IdQ's

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Specialist Curators: An Endangered Species

Biology Curators Group, Geology Curators Group and Society of Museum Archaeologists

With the gradual loss of the specialist curator, what is happening to the research and interpretation of collections? Should the nationals be the only source of specialist knowledge with the non-nationals acting as a collections manager of local heritage?
For further details contact Steve Thompson on 01724 843533.

Identification Qualifications - IdQ's

Widespread and growing concern for the quality of our environment has led to a rapid expansion of legislation and associated procedures for assessing the status of habitats, and for measuring impacts and changes. One consequence of this is a heavy demand for practical field investigations and reports.

A universal feature of biological monitoring, biological impact assessments and nature conservation studies is a requirement for identifying animal and plant species. From these identifications, information on abundance, distribution, richness, change and many other aspects is then acquired. Fundamental to the entire process is accurate identification and the consistent use of the right names for the fauna and flora. The significance of subsequent analyses and interpretation is heavily dependent on this stage of the process, yet it is so often taken for granted and the identification skills required are much underrated. Without confidence in the original data, any final recommendations must be open to doubt — a concern increasingly expressed by environmentalists.

To address this problem, the Natural History Museum introduced the Identification Qualification (IdQ) scheme in 1993 with the aim of improving standards in environmental work in the UK by awarding certificates of competence in animal and plant identification to biologists and ecologists. The IdQ's external Advisory Board has a membership drawn by nomination from industry, consultancies, universities and non-governmental organisations. This is the first scheme of its kind to deal specifically with identification, and has been widely praised.

Qualification is by examination within a particular subject area, and the Natural History Museum is the awarding body. IdQís are available in a wide range of subjects, including vascular plants, freshwater algae, aquatic macrophytes, freshwater macro-invertebrates, marine meiofauna groups and freshwater fishes. They are normally held at the NHM in London and consist of an exam lasting c. 3 hours. The exam tests a knowledge of nomenclature and terminology of characters as well as the ability to identify and key out a wide range of species from the relevant plant group(s).

The vascular plant IdQ, for example, consists of a section to test the participant's understanding of nomenclature and morphology followed by fresh samples of 50 species of vascular plants to be identified, usually to species level. Ten selected 'spot' samples must be identified without the aid of field guides or identification keys. The species are chosen to reflect a range of families and habitats, including woodland, ruderal, chalk grassland, marsh, coastal and heathland, and are collected by a group of collectors from around the UK to provide a spread of geographic location.

The Freshwater Macro-invertebrates exam consists of a practical test lasting two and a half hours and half hour written paper. The practical test includes approximately 50 specimens — larval, juvenile and adult — which have to be identified to various specified levels. A short written paper comprises questions on morphology, structure of keys and the correct use of scientific names.

Keys and other manuals may be used in most parts of the exams, but in the time available some of the material has to be identified largely 'by eye' to at least the major groups.

In addition to the full IdQ certificate for candidates who achieve the 90 per cent pass mark for the examination, the NHM also recognises an Intermediate Standard for candidates who do not reach the pass mark but who attain at least 70 per cent — intended to encourage the progressive acquisition of identification skills.

The fees range from £200-£250 for each exam. For further information please contact the Science Marketing Office, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Rd, London, SW7 5BD, Tel: 0171 938 9261, Fax: 0171 938 9189, or e-mail: rjl@nhm.ac.uk.

Wanted

H.M. Customs and Excise
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Dear BCG

Could you please ask your members for any mammal skins/furs for my talks in regard to endangered species to schools and other interested groups. If there are any available for donation or loan I would be extremely grateful. I am particularly interested in big cat skins but would be grateful for anything.

Mr. Geoff Conner
CITES Officer