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Title: A Collection Rescue Operation in the North West

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EDINBURGH CONFERENCE SPECIALIST SESSION

A COLLECTION RESCUE OPERATION IN THE NORTH WEST

The first stage, necessary before "rescue", is the gathering and processing of information concerning the collections. This information is essential knowledge in order to act and prevent the destruction, dispersion or further deterioration of natural history museum material. It is obvious that as the survey progresses (along the lines given in the Museums Journal, 77(4); 188) a number of museums exist without either qualified zoological, botanical or geological curators, or no curatorial staff whatsoever, which possess collections requiring some form of action to prevent them from disappearing altogether. Information on collections is obtained in several basic ways.

1. Locating museums and related institutions. This may seem rather obvious and facile but many museums closed decades ago or have been amalgamated. They are not all in public ownership. Other institutions to possess collections can be libraries, societies, schools, colleges and universities. These are more difficult to survey for reasons such as difficulty of access and the general lack of knowledge concerning the presence of such material within their organisation. Dispersion of collections, especially when it occurred outside living memory, causes problems and creates ramifications, a classic example of which is the Royal Institution in Liverpool.

2. By collectors' name. The initial approaches in this direction usually involve literature searches. Obituaries, bibliographies and local natural history society journals can be very productive regarding the contents and destinations of individual naturalists' collections.

3. Site visits. The follow up to the basic work is a visit to the institution last purported to be the curator of a named collection. This can often be frustrating and not only for the reason that the collections are no longer there (some custodians of such material are remarkably reticent about allowing anyone to look at it). Alternatively, such visits can be most productive in the most unlikely places and valuable collections can come to light which were previously totally unknown. This is the element of luck which accompanies much work of this kind. Sometimes, not only is the collection still in existence where it is supposed to be but it is also in excellent condition and there are manuscript catalogues present, previously unsuspected. This illustrates the concept that a total lack of curation can be better than misguided but well-meaning reorganisation or amalgamation which has caused the loss of identity of large numbers of one-time distinct and historically interesting collections.

On a site visit it is important to gain access to all the nooks and crannies for often the staff do not themselves know the value of the material and will simply dismiss further search as fruitless whereas this is not always the case.

4. Assessment. Having found a collection its "value" has to be assessed.

This will often be the most involved part of the work and therefore time-consuming, but is obviously the most important. A collection has to be known and proved to be of value, as well as in some danger, before a rescue need be effected. Although the members of the Northwest Collection Research Unit include a cross-section of disciplinary interest, and have recently been joined by the geologists, outside help has to be solicited from other specialists. Involvement with biographical, historical, handwriting analysis, taxonomic and other related topics arises. The single most important reason for action being taken regarding a collection will be the presence of primary type material. This is usually defined as holotype, neotype, lectotype or syntypic series. Naturally, the presence of other type categories will have some importance. Otherwise, collections containing specimens with full data, determined or not, could find a home in any reference collection and older material may have an historical value which can be equally important.

It can be said that the NWCRU are already rescuing collections- from obscurity. The physical rescue, i.e. removal to a better place, of some collections is currently being considered and the best means of achieving this investigated.

E. G. Hancock
July 1978

(The commentary on the various 35mm slides which accompanied the various headings as examples is not included here).

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THE TYPE-CONCEPT: STEADY STATE OR BIG BANG?

Understanding of the term "type" has been confused by its use in two opposing, though related, concepts. Both are derived from the pre-Darwinian beliefs that each genus represented a separate act of creation within which one species more fully expressed the "essence" of that genus than the others grouped around it. This central "ideal" species was the type, but could be displaced if a more "typical" species was discovered. Likewise within a species the type was subject to successive replacement by specimens which more perfectly "typified" the species than did the original specimen.

From these early practices arose on the one hand (the "steady state") the nomenclatural concept of the type as an unchanging and unique reference point governing the application of the name of a taxon and objectively defining it, and on the other hand (the "big bang") an ever-expanding galacy of "types" radiating out from the primary type, through the type-series, to topotypes, specimens named by the author of the species name, specimens subsequently compared with the primary type, voucher reference sets, and so on. This stemmed from a reluctance to base the taxonomic concept of a taxon on a single, and possibly atypical (in the statistical sense) unit.

To reconcile these two extremes the concept of nominal taxa was introduced for the concept denoted by the name and objectively defined by the unique type,