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LETTERS

HERBARIUM LABEL and INDEX CARD

Anyone consulting a major herbarium must be struck by the enormous variety of labels used, and by the resulting variation in the quality of information given on each sheet.

Many of those consulting herbaria are not particularly anxious to examine the actual specimen itself, but are mainly interested in the data on the label e.g. locality etc. With this in mind, a card index system, duplicating the information on the sheet, would prevent unnecessary handling of, and consequent damage to, the actual sheets.

Would it be possible for the BSBI, acting in conjunction with museums and herbaria to devise a "British Standard" herbarium label? This could be printed on paper backed with pancake dry gum, and an interleaf of one-time carbon inserted between it and a thin card, all three being bound together as a unit. The top would then form the label for the relevant sheet, and the bottom copy could be filed in a card index.

Such labels could be produced in bulk by the Society and sold to institutions as well as to those members who maintain herbaria. This would bring a degree of uniformity into the labelling of specimens as well as creating an efficient information retrieval system.

Of course this does not guarantee that all the information asked for on the label got filled in, but at least the blank spaces would act as a reproachful spur to memory!

ROBIN STEVENSON, 13 Brookside Gardens, SUNDERLAND, Tyne & Wear.

HERBARIUM LABELS AND INDEX

Referring to Robin Stevenson's plea for a standard herbarium label combined with an index card, I have serious doubts whether such a label would find general acceptance and whether it would fulfill modern information needs. This is not to deny the attraction of Mr. Stevenson's idea, but we must consider the limitations that might curtail its usefulness if it were adopted and put into practice.

The following remarks are based upon experience gained in cataloguing more than 20,000 herbarium specimens.

A standard label can restrict the amount of information recorded because of its limited size, and because only a few headings are prescribed on it. Full documentation requires an A5 (210mm x 148mm) record form, which is too large in the original to be used as a herbarium label. However, used as a written record to accompany a specimen, such a form can be devised so that a reduced version can be printed in 12-point typeface from an office word-processor or mini-computer.

The use of a carbon copy index card is restricted by the fact that a set of cards can be arranged in only one sequence, e.g. by Dandy number *or* by grid square *or* by vice county, etc. Finally, the introduction of a standard label of conventional type would not resolve the greater problem of making available existing herbarium data.

With the latter objective in view a project to catalogue all our British vascular plant specimens has been in progress at Birmingham City Museum (BIRA) since June 1979. It involves firstly, transcribing the original collector's labels and annotations on to a standard form arranged by subject headings and secondly, typing into a computer keyboard to permit automatic sorting, selection, arrangement and printing of catalogues and indexes. A full account will be published in due course (computer input will finish in June 1981), but readers may like to know that our standard form is size A5 and contains no less than 20 headings. This is necessary to accommodate the miscellany of information that the nineteenth century collector recorded and the additional data needed to create a modern biological record. A copy of this form can be supplied on receipt of a stamped addressed envelope.

The system we are operating would very easily deal with the accession of new specimens and the mini-computer in use here offers far more versatile indexing than any carbon duplicate. On printing-out from the mini-computer (in typeface quality equal to electric typewriter), the data can be neatly condensed to label size while at the same time producing multiple copies as index 'cards'.

I would suggest adoption of record forms printed in books on tear-out pages with interleaved carbon for the collector to retain. Initially however, some tried and tested schemes should be examined to discover the best formula for recording.

DR B.A. SEDDON, Keeper, Nat. Hist. Dep't, City Museums and Art Gallery, BIRMINGHAM B3 3DH.