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Natural History Conservation Some Problems (a discussion paper)

Natural history collections can be perceived as the poor relation of the museum world. Collections, even those of great scientific or historical value, generally have a very low market value and in consequence:

low market value = low prestige = low finance

Furthermore there is little recognition of many of the problems inherent within collections and in many institutions any conservation which exists is *subsumed within* natural history departments, there being little distinction from curatorial areas. An interesting comparison is *The Natural History Museum* with *one* conservation laboratory (within Geology), as opposed to *The National Gallery* with its large conservation department.

Linked to the above, research to date has been minimal and there is yet no formal training or qualifications.

Much conservation is 'display led' repair and/or refurbishment of mainly vertebrate mounted specimens.

The private sector may not yet be the most suitable environment for the freelance natural history conservator who, unlike a freelance taxidermist seeking work in a variety of markets, is basically dependent upon the museum/public sector.

Insufficiency of museum/public sector work may prevent investment in premises suitable for work on large or environmentally sensitive items, which in turn may lead to even further reductions in requests for work. (Many taxidermists work out of garden sheds or garages!).

Most of the leading freelance taxidermists recognise that even in the age of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) some museum taxidermists are essential to maintain a pool of high standards, skills and development.

In-house natural history conservators are needed for these reasons, especially as much of the work could be of a development/research nature. Already, botany conservation is mainly suited to institutions where work can be undertaken in conjunction with paper conservation.

The number of natural history technicians/taxidermists in museums has probably decreased by as much as 40% in the last 20 years whilst the number of natural history curatorial posts would appear at least to have remained static. The ratio of curatorial : technical posts has certainly increased many times over.

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This paper is intended to raise discussion. Any views should be sent to the Group Editor, Simon Moore for inclusion in the next issue.

NSCG Conference and AGM

Ipswich Museum, 27-28 March 1996

Although the actual venue was slightly different Ipswich welcomed back the group for its second meeting since the *Life After Death* conference in 1992. Mike Evans the Head of the County Museums Service welcomed the group to Ipswich giving some background history to the museum which was originally a natural history museum when it opened its doors in 1853, the only museum at that time to have a mounted gorilla specimen and a cased giraffe!

There followed a series of high-quality talks throughout the day started off by Diana O'Sullivan from the Horniman Museum who spoke of the Care of Collections Forum which was evolved by a group of curators at the Getty preventative conservation course. The forum covered as wide a constituency as possible including the management of environmental monitoring systems, data, documentation and low-cost storage solutions. She continued about the Horniman's strategy to secure protective and supportive situations for collections on display and loan, also for reserve/research collections against dust and pollutants (especially from the nearby South Circular road), staff weaknesses, temperature, RH, light and pest infestations.

Simon Moore spoke about his experimental project of setting up a mycoherbarium at the Hampshire County Council Museums Service. As Hampshire contains such mycota rich areas as the New Forest it seemed sensible to set up a herbarium of freeze-dried slices of fungi so that their

anatomy could be more easily examined scientifically and that the collection of herbarium folders would take up much less space than a collection of entire specimens. He mentioned, however, that entire specimens, more for display purposes, already existed. He welcomed suggestions as to how such a herbarium could be improved.

Paul Radcliffe from Chris Collins' geological conservation unit at Cambridge University spoke of a project to conserve a badly-degraded ichthyosaur whose matrix was cracked and crumbling. This was conserved using an effective but expensive mixture of CIBA-GEIGY resins and phenolic microballoons, backed onto aluminium foil with cornuba wax both as a support and separator.

The degradation of certain microslide mountants over time formed the basis of Paul Brown's talk. Although balsamic mounts were still OK after 150 years, gum chloral and phenol balsam were found to blacken irreversibly and dissolve cuticle. Gum chloral was also found to crystallise (reversed by rehydration) although the crystals had often disrupted specimens. He also advocated the use of phase contrast microscopy when using balsam mountant since its refractive index was close to that of insect cuticle. He wound up advising slide mounters to use the correct solvent for mountants: xylene should not be used for the excellent mountant 'Euparal', Euparal Essence should always be used (obtainable from: Asco Labs, 52 Levenshulme Road, Gorton, Manchester, M18 7NN).