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THE EVALUATION OF NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS: SOME REMARKS.

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Dealing with the problem of evaluation does not mean that a museum has interest in selling its collections. To evaluate might mean make available a tool of diagnosis and management.

For an essentially practical point of view the current needs of evaluation are:

- insurance of collections stored in the museum and/or of loans.
- appraisal of new collections or specimens to be entered in the museum both for purchases and donations (when required by donor).
- in off-museum dealings where the technicians of the museum act as appraisers.
- the adaptation of new models of management that require the evaluation of the heritage.

These needs imply monetary value. Market references (historic or current) with which it is possible to have a guideline in the process of evaluation:

- buying and selling specimens or collections
- auctions
- traffic between collectors
- taxidermists
- hunting evaluations by professionals or by public authorities.
- ...

These references are clearly insufficient to cover the whole of natural history collections. Therefore, the value of replacement is used in these cases. However, this value is very often impossible to calculate because of the singularities of the material. Consequently, monetary evaluation can become valuable in order to avoid bad uses of the specimens. This affirmation is more clear when we consider that museums must not obtain financial profit from their collections.

Nevertheless, an evaluation of the "quality" of the collections in a museum can be more meaningful. The quality could be expressed in an absolute or relative way by means of several measures. These measures would be dimensions of the collections housed in a museum. The variables that can be more or less quantified are:

- size of collections
- number of type specimens
- amount of information attached to the specimens
- number of specimens of rare, endangered or extinct species
- rhythm of consultations of the collections by the staff of the museum and by external consultants
- methods of preservation and their diversity in each species specific series
- condition of conservation of collections
- rhythm of published works based on museum specimens
- grants or funds devoted to the study or conservation of collections
- number of collectors or donors
- ...

These measures would allow direct testing on the "health" of the collections. The measure of the quality in relative terms could be

- other museums ranking
- own history of the museum: when the museum has results of these tests in different times, we would be able to know the temporal evolution of collections
- goals established by the museum: estimation of the effectiveness of development programmes involving collections

The two latter contexts can be interesting ways to obtain static and dynamic diagnoses of collections. An evaluation according to these points of view can be useful and even necessary for planning and managing the collections.

Fortunately, biology has created methods to compare and study different inventories. These techniques could be easily adapted to the analysis of collections, so that evaluation would become a standard process.

EVALUATING THE EARTH SCIENCES COLLECTIONS AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

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In 1994 the Board of Trustees of the Royal Ontario Museum approved implementation of **ROM 2000**, a vision statement setting out the goals and priorities of the museum to the year 2000. One objective in achieving this vision is to identify, strengthen, and concentrate on excellence in the museum's collections and research activities. An evaluation of the collections was seen as the necessary first step in identifying areas of excellence.

As a pilot project, the collections of the Earth Science departments (Geology, Mineralogy, Invertebrate Palaeontology, and Vertebrate Palaeontology) were assessed, chiefly for their research value, by a committee consisting of members from each of the four departments. The study looked at coherent subsets of the collections and attempted to determine for each one: a) how significant this collection is at an international, national, or regional level; and b) how this collection might contribute to research results that would be judged by peers to be significant on an international, national or regional level.

In attempting to produce an objective assessment, the committee took into consideration the results of recent external peer reviews of departments' operations commissioned by the museum; records of external use of the collections through research loans and academic visitors; levels of recent grant support for collections-based research by ROM scientists; the record of publications citing ROM specimens; and citations of ROM collections published in external surveys.

The collections were also evaluated for their present and potential use in education, display, public programs and for the level of media interest. The Public Programs and Education division of the museum will be carrying out an independent assessment of the value of the ROM's various collections for their programs.

The process developed in the pilot project will be applied to the evaluation of other collections within the ROM. The final results of the collections evaluations will be used to help focus financial and human resources in areas of