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service training for museum professionals in relevant positions is the correct way to develop expertise in this field. The current employment situation for conservators, let alone natural science conservators, is difficult. We are losing good young conservators from the field because of the lack of funding for the field and the lack of available positions for natural science conservators. This style of professional training by accredited attachment may be the best way to develop expertise in the field and to also increase awareness among 'mainstream' conservators of the field and how knowledge of natural science materials should be an essential core knowledge for conservators.

Hopefully we will also be able to develop further modules around the course using expertise from other museums. The ultimate aim must be to develop a modularised training schedule for natural science conservation which will provide training and support throughout a natural science conservator's career and allow them to 'cross-over' into 'mainstream' conservation or management. A co-ordinated professional training program in the field is essential for the future growth of our field.

Contacting us...

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Chris Collins

Reviews of the Course

This five-week course was organised by Chris Collins of The Geological Conservation Unit, Department of Earth Sciences, Cambridge University. It was held at three institutions (the above, The Botany Department at the Natural History Museum, London and The Botany, Geology and Zoology Departments at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales), all well known for their contributions to natural science conservation in the UK. In addition to myself, the course was only attended by one other individual, a situation that created a relaxed atmosphere and informal approach to tuition that included preparation and storage techniques as well as remedial treatments.

Some aspects of the curation of natural science collections were covered which helped to put into perspective the role of the conservator, balancing the needs of the collections with those of the curators and others using them.


Documentation was covered throughout the course with regard to surveys, condition and treatment reports and broader collection management issues such as loan procedures. There was a strong emphasis on preventive conservation which included environmental monitoring and control, pest management and storage materials. Various health and safety issues were discussed such as toxic and radioactive minerals, pesticides in botanical and entomological collections and arsenic in taxidermy specimens. Remedial treatments ranged from basic cleaning and repair to consolidation and other specialist treatments as for pyrite decay.

The content of this course was ideal for someone involved in the care of natural science collections. The trainers were very knowledgeable in both their own specialist areas and general conservation practices. It was an added bonus to meet the tutors in their working environment. Seeing other museums' storage facilities and how their staff approach the care of collections provoked many questions and discussions and, as there were only two students the topics covered could be adapted to suit our requirements and levels of knowledge.

Although courses such as this are quite regularly held in North America, particularly under the auspices of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, this is the first course of its kind on this side of the Atlantic. At a time when the need to preserve this important part of our heritage is gaining greater recognition, it is not likely to be the last.

I would like to thank the course organiser and tutors for their advice and assistance throughout the course and the Museums and Galleries Commission for a grant towards the cost.

*Jill Kerr
Ulster Museum*



This five week course was set up and co-ordinated by Chris Collins of the Geological Conservation Unit, University of Cambridge and was divided into three components at three institutions: two weeks at Cambridge (Geological Conservation Unit), one at The Natural History Museum, London (Botany Department) and two weeks at the National Museums & Galleries, Wales (Conservation team within Geology, Botany and Zoology).

The modular nature of the course meant that only one other participant attended the course at the same time as myself. Jill Kerr, the natural history conservator for the Ulster Museum. With just two of us this gave rise to very relaxed sessions which proved more accommodating to our individual needs. The course aim is to provide a solid overview of the factors which influence the deterioration of natural science materials, how collections are maintained and how conservation problems could be resolved. This was achieved by a good course structure and balance between theory, documentation and practical work.

The first week was an introduction covering many aspects of preventive conservation. Agents of deterioration, health and safety, ethics, materials

science, and surveying whole collections were discussed. A number of collections were reviewed (zoological, anthropological and geological) and a survey report was written for each. Particular attention was given to condition surveys of collections and specimens to stress the importance of documentation. The subsequent weeks focused on particular types of collection and their associated problems, working alongside the conservator or curator responsible for specific collections. All aspects of conservation were considered both on a large scale and at collection and specimen level.

The course has been of great value to me as a curator. In five weeks a wide range of conservation problems and possible solutions in all fields of natural history was covered. The informal structure and flexibility of this course is ideally suited to small groups and, with such competent tutors, will adequately accommodate the needs of museum workers from a variety of backgrounds and levels of knowledge. One of the great strengths of the course was its division into three placements. This provides an opportunity to see how different collections work in practice. In addition to this, by working alongside the individual conservators in their own workplace different approaches are revealed that may not become apparent from a formal teaching structure. I believe this course has given me both the knowledge and confidence to tackle conservation issues in my workplace.

I would like to thank all of the conservators and curators involved in the teaching of this course and also to express my gratitude to the Museums & Galleries Commission who awarded me a grant towards the cost of the course.

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