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NatSCA News

Title: The Natural History Collections Working Group

Author(s): van Dam, D., Purewal, V.

Source: van Dam, D., Purewal, V. (2003). The Natural History Collections Working Group. *NatSCA News, Issue 1*, 20 - 21.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/342>

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The Natural History Collections Working Group

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“Sharing, expanding, and promoting our knowledge and skills through international collaboration”

The Natural History Collections Working Group (NHCWG) is one of the specialist Working Groups of the Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC). It is the largest of the 28 International Committees of ICOM (International Council of Museums) with over 1400 members worldwide from every branch of the museum and conservation profession. ICOM-CC aims to promote the conservation, investigation and analysis of culturally and historically significant works and to further the goals of the conservation profession.

The Triennial Congress brings the membership of ICOM-CC together to review and report on current research. Over 1000 papers have been published in the Congress Pre-prints in the past twenty years.

The Working Groups actively communicate with their members through newsletters, meetings and at the Triennial Congress. The NHCWG has about 150 members in more than 50 countries.

A brief history

During the last triennial period (1999-2002) the NHCWG was not functioning at its maximum potential. Due to unfortunate circumstances, the Co-ordinator stepped down leaving the WG unmanaged, without a newsletter, or a programme for the triennial meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2002). Since ICOM-CC is the only multilingual platform in the field of natural history collections conservation, the ICOM-CC board recognized the seriousness of this unfortunate situation. With the help of the North-American Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC), two candidates for the function of Co-ordinator were found and were appointed as Interim Co-ordinators until election in Rio.

In an attempt to get the WG fully back on its feet, the Interim Co-ordinators organized a forum discussion at the triennial meeting in Rio with the following self-revealing title:

“Knowledge loss, knowledge gaps, and the need for knowledge in natural history collections conservation.”

The ensuing discussions lead to a consensus in how the WG should take up its future role and resulted in a preliminary program for the next three-year period. The discussion was introduced by three short presentations about the following issues:

1. *Knowledge loss.* Loss of conservation knowledge and skills is a worldwide problem in Natural History Museums and can result through lack of training programmes or trainees, changing role of the collection manager, shortage of funds etc. How can we preserve our skills?
2. *Knowledge gaps.* Natural history has probably one of the longest traditions in preservation, but we are still learning about the chemical reactions that take place in our preserved specimens. Most preservation techniques are still based on individual experience and tradition than on objective analytical research. How can we fill these gaps?
3. *Knowledge need.* In most countries there are no training programmes concerning the preservation of natural history collections. International training programs could possibly provide a solution for this problem. How can we transfer and expand our knowledge?

After the discussion (attended by 80+ members) the following preliminary conclusions were made:

- The WG recognizes the existence of problems such as loss of conservation skills, serious gaps in conservation research and lack of training.
- These problems are not restrained to a few countries but affect most countries in the world.
- To resolve these problems, it is necessary for the existing national and international natural history societies and conservation institutes to collaborate. By assimilating knowledge through the expertise of natural history conservators, we can effectively and efficiently put back the knowledge and skills that have since been lost. The development of a web-based “conservation expertise network” together with a “mobile conservation skills lab” could be a useful instrument to realize such objectives.
- It is recommended that an interim meeting is held to discuss attainment of these goals outlined at the Rio meeting.

NHCWG programme 2002-2005

Taking the conclusions of the forum discussion in Rio into account the NHCWG proposes the following programme for the period 2002-2005:

1. Interim meeting considering the development of a web-based “natural history collections conservation expertise network” and a “mobile conservation skills lab” in order to prevent the loss of skills in natural history conservation and to promote the sharing of conservation knowledge. Prior to the meeting the following issues should be addressed:

- What are the possibilities for developing an “international (web-based) conservation expertise network”? Can existing networks in other conservation fields be an interesting model?
- What are efficient and practical methods to preserve and expand our conservation skills? Transfer of knowledge and skills by means of international project-based training programmes can be very successful. In practice, this means that when a collection is in need of conservation, and the conservation knowledge and/or skills in the (international) region are lacking, a training program in the form of a workshop can be organized. Additionally, adapted decision-making models can be very useful, (self) educational and practical instruments to upgrade conservation knowledge and ethics, and can consequently lead to the development of conservation protocols that suit the local situations. This approach of having a workshop based on a decision making model has already been put into practice at the “Ruysch Project” in St. Petersburg (conservation of a 17th century anatomical collection).
- Are national and international natural history societies and conservation institutes interested in collaborating for the benefit of such projects? Can organisations such as ICCROM foster such projects?

2. The WG wants to initiate a discussion about the influence of collection growth (in number and diversity) on conservation quality and conservation ethics. When collections grow infinitely, the quantity may destroy the quality of the collections, primarily because the number of conservators or collection managers will undoubtedly not increase at the same rate, posing a threat to the cultural heritage.

Is it really necessary to house and maintain everything that has ever been collected? Is it stored and managed in the most appropriate place? In some countries there is an overlap of natural history collections managed by different institutions. Selective acquisition, de-accessioning, and conservation as an integrated national policy could be a solution for the problems caused by collection growth. This could result in a higher (conservation) standard, improved accessibility with better general maintenance of the collections. Harmonization enables the different institutions to specialize in their complementary core collections. As a result, each institute will have its own unique collection task within the national collection plan (and therefore justification for its existence).

The Medical Collection, Netherlands is the first national project based on the above-mentioned approach. This project, funded by the Dutch government, is in its final conservation stage.

Programme schedule

2003. Assessment of feasibility in developing a web-based “conservation expertise network” and a “mobile skills lab”.

2004. Interim meeting regarding the development of an ‘expertise network’ and a ‘mobile skills lab’ for natural history collections conservation (presentation of assessment of possibilities).

2005. Triennial meeting ICOM-CC, Den Haag, the Netherlands:

- Presentations on recent developments in natural history collections conservation.
- Report on interim meeting; presentation of plans concerning the ‘expertise network’.
- Forum discussion “Limits to Collection Growth”.

It is very simple to become part of the worldwide network in the field of natural history collection conservation. It will provide a multilingual platform to present and publish your work as a professional, to exchange knowledge and skills with your national and international colleagues and to initiate and be part of global conservation projects.

For membership details, please contact the Co-ordinators, or alternatively, the application form can be found on the ICOM-CC website (<http://www.icom-cc.org>).