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No Pain, No Gain: a personal view of the conference
- Steve Thompson: Keeper of Natural History, Scunthorpe Museum

Well, in short, an excellent, even historic, meeting. After talking about it for a good few years now, we have a merged group, achieved at the end of the day by unanimous vote. The prospects look exciting, so let's hope we hit the ground running and make an impact as early as possible.

But there *was* more to the meeting than that, of course. The talks were themed around the subject of the changes taking place in the museum world at the present time. It was encouraging that we were able to discuss what could be seen as a threatening prospect with considerable optimism. I felt that there was generally a very positive air to the meeting, with an eye firmly on the opportunities before us. The AGMs of course, dominated the first day of the meeting and it would be easy to forget the two talks that were given in the morning. However, they were on two important topics.

The first, given by Tristram Besterman, was about the upheaval taking place at our host institution. I felt that much of specific importance was left unsaid, perhaps not surprisingly. Most people were probably interested in what was likely to happen to the people and those collections at the Museum. Tristram, however, was more concerned with the rationale behind the actions he was recommending, on top of which, of course, many decisions had yet to be taken. But some of the issues that were raised will have sounded very familiar to many there. The need to be more responsive both to the need for change and flexibility within the museum, and to the people who use the museum, its staff and its collections. Of course, many places have been through this already, and perhaps Manchester has, for various reasons, lagged a little behind.

Steve Garland looking at regional changes, particularly the new hubs, gave the second talk. As he himself pointed out, this might not seem to be relevant to many people, but beware! If the scheme is carried through to its planned end, there are very few places that will be left unaffected. If nothing else, it is likely to change the way funding flows through regional museum networks, and some places may also be expected to take on roles and tasks that they have not so far considered. What seems to be clearest is that nothing is very clear at this point in time, with many crucial decisions yet to be made. There will be some doubts that the scheme will work as its planners envisage, or that a large part of the museum community will receive any tangible benefits from it. But Steve pointed out a number of positive signs that have already emerged. These centred very much around the fact that museums and curators within regions have had to communicate more and work together, a trend that will have to continue if the scheme is to work, and which must be welcomed.

As far as natural sciences are concerned, there are both good points and weaknesses revealed. There is potentially more funding available, and an emphasis on outcomes, partnerships and innovation, things that I believe we do well in natural sciences. However, it is clear that we tend to get left out of the "arts and culture" arena all too easily, and suffer from an image problem even within the museum sector. This is at odds with the popularity of natural sciences amongst the general public, and sets a challenge for the new group to work towards redressing this situation.

The second day was very much talk based, with four talks in the morning and three in the afternoon. By and large, these looked more at the tactical aspects of changes taking place rather than the strategic, drawing mainly on people's experiences of specific projects or areas of activity. Having said that, the day as a whole was framed by two talks that were looking at the more general scene.

Velson Horie looked at the changes taking place within the conservation world, and it was interesting to hear what he was saying in the light of the prospects for what the new group might tackle and achieve. The history of conservation over the last twenty years has been of the recognition of a distinct field of endeavour, followed the attempts to gain broader recognition of this, culminating, in natural sciences, in the establishment of NSCG. However, too many small groups have been seen to be diluting their impact and groups

have been merging to form ones more capable of promoting aims effectively. This does not detract from the achievement of NSCG in raising the profile of natural sciences conservation, and it is now the responsibility of the new group to build on this achievement and take forward the aims of the group in, we hope, a more effective way.

The present trend within conservation as a whole is to try and reshape the sector so as to give a more coherent and effective voice. So, there is a drive by the NCCR to set up a unified body, to generate a set of common standards, to promote better training within the sector and to respond better to the public and other users of the resources with which we are concerned. It seems to me that our situation in NatSCA mirrors this activity remarkably well, and I think we might use this as a focus for own support and promotion of the conservation of natural science collections.

The final talk of the day, from Rob Huxley, also reflected on our potential relationships, and look directly at the possible co-operation between SPNHC and ourselves. SPNHC could quite easily be regarded as a sister organisation in the US, and there are many areas of overlap between the two groups. However, geographical separation alone means that the two groups should not conflict. It does mean that we could benefit greatly from ongoing communication, exchange of experiences and ideas, and collaborative efforts, including publications and major meetings.

The other talks of the day drew on specific experiences, mostly from specific projects within certain institutions. The first was Donna Young's account of the collections' move at Liverpool Museum, a project on a scale that most of us are unlikely to have to contemplate. However, one of Donna's comments was that the size of the project was a minor factor, and that any project needs to be well planned and executed. Her conclusions were to expect the unexpected, have contingency plans and expect extra costs to appear, and none of these relate directly to the scale of a task.

Chris Collin's talk was not about past experience but about one of his current projects, the development of a conservation strategy for the NHM. This task has come about as a result of needing to make NHM activities more efficient and cost-effective, to promote business continuity, to establish clear standards and to standardise conservation across the institution. It will be interesting to see how this develops, but of greatest interest to the rest of us will be certain things that Chris also alluded to. These are the aim to set standards that could be applied world-wide and then to outreach them to other institutions, and the aim to establish training schemes that could then be made available outside of the NHM. This may be the kind of thing where NatSCA could collaborate with the NHM.

From Holland we heard Jan van Tol, from Naturalis in Leiden. Our groups have been watching the development of this exciting facility for some years now, and it was most interesting to hear Jan's views now that things have settled down rather. Most of us have watched enviously, seeing the sums of money that have been made available, but the fact is that a number of things he spoke about reinforced Donna's comments from earlier, about the need for good planning and things not turning out quite as expected. It seems clear that there are a number of things they would do differently if they had the chance. Nevertheless, he was keen to stress the fact that they felt they were in a much better position now than before they started.

After lunch, David Pinniger spoke to us about pest control techniques. This was by no means unfamiliar but I am in favour of repetition. It is all too easy for us, in our busy working lives, to overlook even some of the basic things and it does us no harm at all to be reminded of them. For instance, one of his messages was monitor, monitor, monitor, and checking and changing insect traps is one of those things that can get put off. Perhaps we should add a banner on our journal to say "now you've read this, go and check your traps". On top of that, it also put in our minds the idea of running training courses in this area.

Ollie Crimmen's talk stressed again the value of forward planning before setting off on a project. In this case it was the Darwin Centre Phase 1. Again, while it has clearly been an improvement overall, that doesn't mean the results have been perfect. Lab space is very much reduced, and environmental control has now

been taken away from the collections' managers. Functions, which were formerly carried out in a single office, are now separated. This has been mainly to meet current health and safety needs, but it has resulted in a considerable increase in time taken, as well as a great deal of moving around, a problem not just for the people but also, of course, for the specimens themselves. And some people are not so happy about being put on display along with their collections

The final part of the conference was a question and answer session, and the final question produced some suggestions as to what kind of things that the new group might think about tackling. These included looking at public awareness and raising the profile of museums, particularly what happens behind the scenes, developing our relationships with other bodies, drawing on the strengths of having curators and conservators together, improving our standing with national government and drawing in other disciplines. We will see over the coming months and years how well we have responded to the challenges now before us.

From Maggie Reilly, Membership Secretary

Hello, all you actual and potential members out there. We are very pleased to report that so far over 60% of the potential 'sitting membership' i.e. former members of BCG and NSCG have shown their support by joining NatSCA. We have also already attracted a number of brand new members. This first Newsletter is going out to all new and former members and we hope you find it an enjoyable, informative and encouraging read. Please, if you haven't already, join now - this is the only mailing that will be sent out to non-members.

The subscription year is now 1st February to 31st January. Subscription rates are £15.00 for personal members and £30.00 for institutional members for both UK and overseas institutional subscriptions. We are sorry but we are unable to accept Visa and payment must be made in sterling drawn on a UK bank. We know the requirement to pay in sterling has significant bank charges for overseas subscribers and we are exploring alternative means of payment.

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