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Nature Detectives
- Kate Measures, Nature Detectives Trainer, Heritage Learning Consultant

21st century environmental science opportunity hits museums
This winter, heritage staff and volunteers in the north of England have been attending free Nature Detective training. The Woodland Trust's Nature Detectives Project is an online environmental science project enabling children to develop a lifelong love of nature and concern for our natural heritage. The project links perfectly with many of our heritage sites and museum collections.

What's it all about?
This HLF funded project is the junior wing of the UK Phenology Network – a partnership between The Woodland Trust and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. It is closely also connected to BBC Spring and Autumn Watch programming. Both are based around the science of phenology – the study of the seasons and seasonal changes. Nature Detectives explore the timing of natural seasonal events such as bud burst, migrations and fruiting of common species. The data collected is used , amongst other things, to help track the effects of climate change on our flora and fauna.

What's the history?
Numerous founders of natural history collections and indeed museums themselves were Victorian or Edwardian naturalists and philanthropists. The very same people were recording phenological data. Phenological data held by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology spans back to 1736. This was when the forefather of modern phenology, Robert Marsham began recording 'Indications of Spring' on his family estate near Norwich, Norfolk. He continued to note down significant dates for the next 62 years. His main reason for keeping these records was to improve timber production on his estate but this provides a valuable source of comparative data for us today.

There is no doubt that other of our large estates or some of the founders of our collections and museums also kept such records, (perhaps not so systematically) over the last 200 or so years for game keeping, forestry, groundsmanship or just general interest.

The Royal Metrological Society coordinated an official recording scheme between 1875 and 1947. This was done nationwide and is the source of some of the richest historical data. The records were kept to examine the relationship between meteorological events and the natural world. But the UK Phenology Network didn't start recording until 1998 so where does the data in the middle come from?
Records can turn up in personal diaries, records of estates, museums or archives but also pop up in the most surprising of places such as the door of this garden shed painted with flowering dates of daffodils!

How can museums benefit from the Nature Detectives project?
The project is supported by a fabulous colourful and lively website powered by an excellent database of records. Museums, schools and any other group can access the website at www.naturedetectives.org.uk and download resources, activities and factsheets for free. These can be used as part of existing school and family natural science activity programmes.

Better still, museums can offer Nature Detectives sessions for groups and start recording phonological data at your site. Thousands of schools are already involved in the project and are actively recording data at their schools. Natural science collections can support identification skills and researching historical data. Our museums can provide safe and inspiring venues for learning identification skills, researching historical data and outdoor spaces for recording. Recording as part of Nature Detectives could also provide the prospect of promoting local biological recording schemes and an accessible way for children and schools to get involved.

This is an excellent opportunity to link our natural science collections directly with up-to-the-minute climate change science and for our visitors to input valuable data to the project.

For more information about the project look at the Nature detectives website: www.naturedetectives.org.uk