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Natural History Collections at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

- Jane Arthur, Head of Collection Services, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

For the last 3 years Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery has been looking for a way forward for the natural history collections that would provide long-term preservation and access to these important collections. A Natural History Advisory Board was set up in 2001 with membership from specialist groups and national museums.

- recommend a way forward for the NH collections at BM&AG
- provide specialist advice relating to the care, management, interpretation, access and future collecting

In their initial discussions on the natural history collections the Advisory Board emphasized the need to retain the collection in the region and if possible to find a solution that maintained the collection as a whole. In July 2002 Birmingham City Council and the University of Birmingham agreed in principle a partnership to bring together the biological collections from the University Herbarium, Lapworth Museum of Geology and the School of Biosciences with those of BM&AG to develop the Birmingham Museum of Natural History. The aims of the museum would be:

1. To provide secure and appropriate storage for natural history collections to ensure their long term preservation
2. To implement a programme of assessment and conservation
3. To implement a programme of documentation
4. To create access to the natural history collections for students, researchers and the general public
5. To implement a programme of education and outreach for natural history collections
6. To promote a partnership between the University of Birmingham and BM&AG
7. To provide opportunities to present academic research to the general public

A condition survey of all BM&AG's natural history collections was undertaken in August 2002 by a group of conservation specialists co-ordinated through the Natural Sciences Conservation Group. Following discussions on the project with Heritage Lottery Fund we submitted a bid for a project-planning grant in November 2003 that we hope will develop the aims of the project particularly relating to audience development and access to the natural science collections. If successful this will inform the full bid to HLF to refurbish and fit out a space in the Aston Webb building at the University for the Birmingham Museum of Natural History. The project would also provide for a three-year programme to catalogue, store and make accessible the joint natural history collections through on-line resources, displays and education/outreach packages. Bringing these collections together will create a centre of regional and national significance.

Part of BM&AG's natural history collection is on loan to Thinktank for the "Natural World" gallery and an associated programme of education and learning has been developed at Thinktank since opening in September 2001. The proposed natural history museum complements the displays at Thinktank. These together with the Lapworth Museum of Geology, the City and University Botanic Gardens and the Nature Centre would enable the development of a regional centre of excellence for the natural sciences in Birmingham that would be significant and unrivalled outside London.

The scope of the Natural History collections is outlined in the Collecting Policy 2003-2008 approved by Birmingham City Council in October 2003.