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Personal Views of the Conference

SPNHC conference - A Quick View

- Steve Thompson

Well, I write this on my way back from 3 days of intensive conferencing in London, at a very well organised SPNHC international conference. Was it worth it, and what did I get out of it?

The short answer was, yes, it was well worth it. Thirty seven (I didn't get to the very last session) well presented talks, not all guaranteed to keep you on the edge of your seat, but all relevant and interesting, and a few particular highlights, of which more later.

Quite apart from anything else, it was a great opportunity to meet new people, especially our colleagues from abroad. The subject of our profile in Europe was raised on one or two occasions, and it occurs to me that NatSCA should be able to organise, if not a world conference, then at least international to the point where we might regularly expect delegates from Europe. Perhaps that should be one of the challenges we take away (though I quite understand those who are not looking for more challenges just at the moment). Nevertheless, we may well see the benefits of this particular aspect in the form of a study trip this autumn or next spring (see elsewhere in this issue).

The AGM showed that, yes, we can get things done, even if it doesn't always seem like it, and I think that, on reflection, for a committee of hard pressed people for a new organisation, the record on such things as the newsletter, website, meetings and study trips is not looking too bad, though we can and will improve further.

Alas, I didn't get to the tours or workshops, though I gather the former went very well, and I did find the trip to the Wandsworth outstation very interesting. I certainly hope that those who travelled from abroad were impressed with the organisation and will take away a good impression of the British groups.

And what were the highlights for me? I was very taken by Julia Sigwart's talk on getting volunteers into the Natural History Museum in Dublin. In a way, it might have seemed simple and straightforward, but the best ideas are, in hindsight, however, it takes someone with that extra bit of imagination to come up with them. The key thing about their scheme is that anyone would be able to do it, it doesn't need the resources of a major museum to make it work.

That contrasts with another talk I found particularly interesting, from Louise Welzenbach, on the Antarctic Meteorites program. This most definitely does require the resources of a major institution, as she acknowledged. Nevertheless, as someone with a long time fascination with all things astronomical, I thoroughly enjoyed the talk, even though I doubt I will ever have a practical use for it.

James Macklin's talk on the use of zoomable images in online databases should have been of interest to anyone who is trying to make their collections information more accessible, which is most of us. I must admit, the fact that the resources used were cheap or free does have considerable attraction, and I will be looking at some of the items he mentioned irrespective of our efforts in the database filed.

The presentation on IPM (Integrated Pest Management) was also of great interest, partly because of its applicability in a wide variety of situations, but also because the principals could be extended beyond that of pest control. It has also made me think a good deal about the whole issue of the integration of risk management schemes across the board, as I wonder now whether we could adopt a more streamlined approach to risk strategies in museums. Watch this space!

And finally, although it was what we kicked off with, Bob May's keynote speech should have had us all thinking quite hard. Whether you agree with him or not, he strikes me as the kind of person who is unable to speak a word without being both interesting and challenging. Here he set us two challenges. First, why is it so difficult for us to coordinate our documentation systems for collections / taxonomic information, when other disciplines seem to have solved it a long time ago? We have, as was pointed out several times during the conference, been talking about this for decades, and yet it has produced little or no progress. The second challenge was over our very purpose. Do we do what we do now, in terms of collections development, management and use, as a form of ritual, or do we actually have a clear idea of just *why* we collect, research and document the natural world? I believe, or at least suspect, that we do know why we do it, but we have failed to articulate it clearly to the outside world. Given the threats facing not just the museums world, but also the whole of human society, this seems to be worth getting to grips with.

A Jamaican participant's perspective

- Dionne E. Newell, Natural History Division, Institute of Jamaica

My journey to the conference was long by any stretch of the imagination, and in more ways than one, but ultimately this long and sometimes difficult journey resulted in a worthwhile experience.

My journey started from the moment the conference announcement was brought to my attention in the SPNHC newsletter to which my Museum, The Institute of Jamaica (IOJ), subscribes. Established in 1879, the Institute of Jamaica comprises several Divisions that reflect Jamaica's cultural heritage. The Natural History Division, of the Institute of Jamaica, forms the bedrock of a museum conglomerate for the encouragement of Literature, Science and Art and maintains some of the largest collections of zoological and botanical specimens in the Caribbean. These collections are representative of the island's rich biological diversity. The organization holds a rich history of collaborations with regional and international museums and is member to groups and societies such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC), SPNHC and NatSCA.

I have been entrusted with the care and conservation of Jamaica's national faunal collections since 1999 and have always expressed the need for exposure and additional training in order to gain knowledge and experience so that our collections are maintained at an internationally acceptable standard. So a conference on STANDARDS! Just perfect! But how do I get there? I was enticed by the bursary offer and saw it as my ticket to a much-needed forum of museum professionals like myself. So I cautiously submitted an application and was thrilled to see, some weeks later, that I had been awarded a bursary that covered the conference fees.

So, there I was, a recipient of the bursary that funded the conference fees, thousands of miles away from England and I still needed to get there! I bravely approached the management board of the IOJ for the additional funds needed with the task of convincing them that it would be a worthwhile investment, if I were given the opportunity to garner new and exciting 'first world' methods for the benefit of the museum. The importance of this opportunity was not lost on the IOJ board and the rest is history. I landed on British soil eager and excited to meet and greet persons that I had only previously known via emails and publications.

As I scanned the room packed with participants who were obviously familiar with each other, I looked around for someone, anyone, who, like me, was new to the affair. The group was largely European and North American and I was somewhat disappointed at the absence of a fellow delegate from the Caribbean. Notwithstanding, I was eager to learn more about museum practices from the perspective of a European or North American museum, which may be different in terms of environmental issues, but similar in operational practices.

I chose the field trip to Kew Gardens, as although I am an entomologist by training, I also had a responsibility to my botanical colleagues to capture images and learn preservation methods employed in the herbarium. I was impressed with the exhibits, and the large compost heap in operation. That provided me with great ideas to recommend to the curators of our botanical gardens on my return home.

As the days rolled by, the conference papers presented on standards in various museums and their practices