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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

highlighted the fact that the overall experiences were quite similar to ours in terms of administrative duties. It was refreshing to note that other curators also had the never-ending task of trying to convince greater powers, co-workers and others of the importance of natural history collections. It is quite clear that small, medium and large museums need to effectively put in place relevant and dynamic collections management policies that will guide the effective operations of a museum.

The common challenges of the collections management of Natural History Museums include pest management, limited funding and storage capacity. The Caribbean faces additional challenges in terms of environmental disasters from natural occurrences such as hurricanes and earthquakes and fires. Our museum currently has a disaster management policy that addresses these issues.

I was intrigued by the keynote speaker, Lord May's encouragement to museum professionals to embrace technological advancement by ensuring that the collections do not become irrelevant and antiquated. As such, many museums including ours have answered the call for more efficient databases that will provide quick access to information for the public. Our museum hosts the National Clearing House Mechanism for Jamaica in accordance with Article 18 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to promote and facilitate the exchange of biodiversity related information. In addition, our museum is in the process of digitizing the biological collections in order to enhance our ability to share data worldwide.

How could I travel this far and not view the British Natural History Museum collections? They are considered to be integrally related to our Jamaican collections, as one of the earliest collectors, Sir Hans Sloane, collected in Jamaica extensively during the 17th century. These collections later formed the basis for the Natural History Museum. As such the tours of various collections of the Natural History museum were of extreme personal interest to me and added spice to the whole experience. My particular interest was in the entomology and zoology collections and I got a chance to interact with the curators and collections managers, view practices and observe some preservation techniques. I received some very good ideas and useful tips on techniques and storage equipment and also recognized how similar our practices are. The tour also gave me a chance to develop links with persons that I am sure to contact in the near future.

My final day was spent at the workshop on standards. The presentations were useful and the activities allowed participants to display creativity and expertise. I was in a reflective mode throughout the workshop as I quietly evaluated our museum's current status with respect to policies. Whilst commending the achievements of our museum over the last couple of years, we have redeveloped our collections management policy; I also recognize that some fundamental areas need to be addressed.

Personally, the experience has developed within me a greater appreciation for my role as a Jamaican museum professional with a responsibility to the future generation to maintain high standards. Though our collections are smaller, our tasks are collectively bigger. We operate concurrently as curators, researchers, educators and collections managers on a day-to-day basis. It is heartening to learn that we are not alone in a world that still does not fully understand the importance of natural history collections. The overall exposure encourages a shift from the complacency that can be created within a comfort zone to that of agility and excitement. I am encouraged to share with my colleagues, all that I have seen and learnt so that our institution, though more than 120 years old, remains current and relevant within a continuously evolving society.

**June 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> at the Natural History Museum, London**  
**- Kelly Dilks, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery**

This was an interesting and illuminating conference to attend especially if like me you are relatively new to museums and are still trying to find your way through procedures and standards. The overall conference theme was Realising Standards and the conference programme did exactly that. Standards – established, experimental and inspired were explained in detail – well, as much as twenty minutes would allow. These standards explored how we as a community might take a revised look at established procedures and served as a useful refresher. Ideas, information and inspiration for changing and challenging our day-to-day working practice and innovative ways of caring for and creating access to our collections were presented.

I hope the following presentations I have chosen to outline will be of interest to those NatSCA members who could not attend the conference and for those that did I hope you would be interested to read the opin-