

Programme 2002-2005

Natural History Collections

Introduction

At the triennial meeting in Rio the Natural History Collections Working Group (NHCWG) organized a forum discussion with the following self-revealing title: "*Knowledge loss, knowledge gaps, and the need for knowledge in natural history collections conservation.*"

The discussion was mainly focussed on the following issues:

- Knowledge loss. Loss of conservation knowledge and skills is a worldwide problem in Natural History Museums and is caused by various reasons (such as lack of training programs or trainees, changing role of the collection manager, lack of money etc). How can we preserve our skills?
- Knowledge gaps. Natural history has probably one of the longest traditions in preservation, but still we know very little about the actual chemical (degradation) processes that take place in our preserved specimens. Most preservation techniques are still based on individual experience and tradition than on objective analytic research. How can we fill the gaps?
- Knowledge need. In most countries there are no training programs concerning the preservation of natural history collections. International training programs could possibly provide a solution for this problem. How can we transfer and expand our knowledge?

After the discussion the WG made the following (preliminary) conclusions:

- The WG recognizes the existence of problems such as loss of conservation skills, serious gaps in conservation research and lack of training.
- These problems are not restrained to a few countries but affect most countries in the world.
- To resolve these problems, it is necessary for the existing national and international natural history societies and conservation institutes to collaborate. By bundling the rare expertise on natural history collections conservation, we can effectively and also more efficiently get the knowledge and skills back to those places where it was lost. The development of a web-based "conservation expertise network" together with a "mobile conservation skills lab" could be a useful instrument to realize such objectives.
- For these reasons, the WG suggests that an interim meeting about how to achieve these goals should follow up the meeting in Rio.

Programme proposal

Taking the conclusions of the forum discussion in Rio into account the NHCWG proposes the following

programme for the period 2002-2005:

1. Interim meeting about the development of a web-based "natural history collections conservation expertise network" and a "mobile conservation skills lab" in order to prevent the loss of skills in natural history conservation and to promote the sharing of conservation knowledge. Prior to the meeting the following issues should be addressed:

- What are the possibilities for developing an "international (web-based) conservation expertise network"? Can existing networks in other conservation fields (such as the INCCA project) be an interesting format for such a network?
- What are efficient and practical methods to preserve and expand our conservation skills? Transfer of knowledge and skills by means of international project-based training programs can be very successful. In practise, this means that when a collection is in need of conservation, and the conservation knowledge and/or skills in the (international) region are lacking, a training program in the form of a workshop can be organized.

Additionally, adapted decision-making models can be very useful (self) educational and practical instruments to upgrade the conservation knowledge and ethics, and can consequently lead to the development of conservation protocols that suit the local situations. This approach of having a workshop based on a decision making model has already been put into practise at the "Ruysch Project" in St Petersburg (conservation of a 17th century anatomical collection).

- Are national and international natural history societies and conservation institutes interested in collaborating for the benefit of such projects? Can organisations such as ICCROM foster such projects?

2. The WG wants to initiate a discussion about the influence of collection growth (in number and in diversity) on conservation quality and conservation ethics. When collections grow infinitely, the quantity may destroy the quality of the collections. Because the amount of conservators or collection managers will certainly not increase at the same rate, they seem to have a good reason to complain that the cultural heritage is at threat.

A legitimate question that arises is if everything that has been collected is really necessary to maintain and when it should be kept if it is stored and managed in the right place (institute). In a lot of countries, there is overlap in natural history collections, which are managed by the different institutes.

Harmonisation, acquisition, de-accessioning, and conservation as an integrated national policy can be a solution for the problems caused by collection growth, because it can result in a higher (conservation) quality, better accessibility and more efficient maintenance of the collections. Harmonisation enables the different institutes to specialize in their complementary core collections. As a result, each institute will have its own unique collection task within the national collection plan (and therefore a damned good reason to exist!).

The "Medical Collection Netherlands" is the first national project that is based on the above-mentioned approach. At the moment, after having gone through the stages of harmonisation, acquisition, and deaccessioning, this project, funded by the Dutch government, is in its final conservation stage.

Programme schedule

2003. Assessment of possibilities to develop a web-based "conservation expertise network" and a "mobile skills lab".

2004. Interim meeting about the development of an "expertise network" and a "mobile skills lab" for natural history collections conservation (Presentation of assessment of possibilities).

2005. Triennial meeting ICOM-CC, Den Haag, the Netherlands:

- Presentations on any recent developments in natural history collections conservation.
- Report on interim meeting; presentation of plans concerning the "expertise network".
- Forum discussion about "Limits to Collection Growth".