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Title: Book Review: Care and Conservation of Natural History Collections. David Carter & Annette Walker 1999.

Author(s): Brown, P. A.

Source: Brown, P. A. (1999). Book Review: Care and Conservation of Natural History Collections. David Carter & Annette Walker 1999.. *NSCG Newsletter, Issue 10*, 11 - 13.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/690>

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Reversibility - Does it Exist?

8-10th September 1999, London.

The British Museum Department of Conservation will hold a three-day conference. The concept of reversibility as applied to cleaning, stabilisation, consolidation, assembly, and restoration will be addressed, as will changes to the physical or chemical properties of objects as a result of conservation. The conference will be confined to the portable heritage, excluding buildings but including mosaics and wall paintings.

For further information and registration pack please contact:

Sara Carroll, Department of Conservation, the British Museum, Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3DG

Fax: 0171 323 8636

Email: conservation@british-museum.ac.uk

Human Remains: Conservation Retrieval and Analysis

7-11th November 1999, Williamsburg, VA, USA.

This conference is being organised by the Departments of Conservation and Archaeology at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Each of the disciplines invited to the conference (conservators, archaeologists, curators, bioarchaeologists and physical anthropologists), approaches human remains from a different point and often at a different time from the others - at times the techniques used by one discipline may impede the work of another.

The aim of the conference is to serve as a forum for discussion between the various professions and to foster interdisciplinary understanding on matters relating to the need for standardisation and the potential for developing policies and procedures relating to the removal, documentation and storage of human remains.

For further information on the program please contact:

Emily Williams, Department of Conservation - BHW, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, P.O. Box 1776, Williamsburg, VA, 23187-1776, USA

Tel: (757) 220 7079

Fax: (757) 565 8752

Email: ewilliams@cwf.org

New Publication

Care and Conservation of Natural History Collections.

David Carter & Annette Walker 1999.

Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford. 226pp

Hardback: 246 x 189 mm: ISBN 0 7506 0961 3: £50.00

A Review

This is the latest volume in Butterworth-Heinemann's series in Conservation and Museology but with an immediate difference being apparent, a picture on the front cover of faded and non-faded atlas moths, a departure from the usual unimaginative black covers. Geological and palaeontological materials conservation have already been covered in this series by Frank Howie and Chris Collins respectively, so this volume covers the curation and conservation of botany, entomology and zoology specimens only. The senior authors, who both work in the Entomology Department at The Natural History Museum in London, are David Carter, an expert in Lepidoptera taxonomy and a Collections Manager, and Annette Walker, a Scientific Associate (Hymenoptera) who has already produced a work on the 'Preparation and Curation of Insects' with T. K. Crosby (1988).

The preface defines terms, splitting the "researcher" who studies the collection from the "curator" (preparator-conservator) who cares for the collection. Short term preparation and preservation methods are considered to have a profound effect on subsequent care and conservation of specimens and occupy the majority of some chapters. The title could perhaps have included the word 'Preparation'. There is a strong emphasis on preventative methods, maintaining appropriate levels of environmental control is cheaper than active conservation necessary as a result of a failure in preparation or care. Also stressed is the need to conserve as much of the specimen as possible for detailed taxonomic research.

The chapters cover the problems of preservation/conservation of 'Vertebrates' (Dick Hendry), 'Insects & other invertebrates' by Carter &

Walker, Mike Fitton and Dick Van-Wright, 'Vascular plants' by David Bedford and 'Non-vascular plants and fungi' by Chris Humphries and Rob Huxley. 'Fluid preservation' by Simon Moore has a much higher conservation content and the very relevant chapter 'Genetic Material' by Terence Brown explains how DNA degrades and discusses which treatments are worst and best for its preservation. The 'Collections environment' chapter covers the location and suitability of museum buildings, rooms and storage, the requirement to separate different museum functions and environmental monitoring and control. The 'Pest management, prevention and control' chapter describes the pests and has comprehensive discussion on 'Integrated Pest Management' techniques (David Pinniger and J D Harmon). The 'Policies and procedures' chapter (Carter & Walker) covers the useful areas of designing and setting up conservation policy, risk assessment, acquisitions and disposal, loans and training policy and collections assessments and conditions surveys.

The Appendices cover 'Documentation' (Carter & Walker), which looks at the different levels of documentation and the use of computer databases and bar codes, and 'Papers, inks and label conservation' (Carter & Walker) which discusses the important issue of using the correct archival papers and inks, particularly useful when using computer generated labels. Further appendices cover 'Disaster planning' written for the NHM's Entomology Department (Jim Reynolds) and 'Flood disaster; a case study' by G. M. Tarmann who writes about the 'nightmare scenario' flood at the Tiroler Landeskundliches Museum, Innsbruck, Austria in August 1985. There is a variety of styles within the work which always is the case when different authors are involved.

The 42 colour plates placed together in one block and 87 black and white photos scattered through the text are of good quality. The line drawings in the insect chapter are reused from Walker & Crosby and could have been replaced by photographs. Small criticisms in the Insect and invertebrate chapter, on page 51, are that microscope slide collections should not be taken for granted as being permanent and may need environmentally stable conditions; and on page 56, the procedure for remounting deteriorating slides of unknown mounting medium is over-simplified. If a mount is found not to be water soluble, a soak in 10% potassium hydroxide

should be tried and failing that, an acetone soak, before resorting to xylene or Euparal Essence. Such work should always be carried out by expert slide preparators and watched very closely to avoid over-treatment when exploring the solubility of a deteriorated slide mountant. It would have been nice to see the NSCG and Biology Curators' Group mentioned specifically as being interested organisations (as was the Guild of Taxidermists) as many of our members contributed. Also, the problems and long term performance of Alizarin and other techniques used for skeletal and cartilage specimen staining could have been mentioned.

There is no doubt that this volume will become 'The Manual' for natural history collections care and conservation, with concise information and a comprehensive up to date bibliography (e.g. Simon Moore's chapter is particularly comprehensive and quotes Julian Carter's latest work on spirit preservatives published in 1997). A general work like this does not have the room to go into fine detail on all possible conservation problems, but the bibliography will provide many of the answers. Future long-term research is required to solve some outstanding conservation problems and the results of such research should feature in any future editions of this work.

Paul A. Brown
The Natural History Museum

