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Collections and Partnerships in Birmingham

Leslie Noè, Thinktank, the Birmingham Science Museum.

Thinktank, the Birmingham Science Museum, is an independent charitable trust and in many ways is a unique organisation. The museum was built and fitted out as a Millennium Project (the largest outside London) at Millennium Point in the Birmingham regeneration area of Eastside – part of a wider project to develop a new learning and leisure quarter for the City. This will include a new Eastside City Park, the largest new park in Birmingham for over 100 years. The City Park will pass immediately in front of Thinktank.

Thinktank, although a museum, does not hold or own collections, but displays specimens belonging to the City of Birmingham and held by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BM&AG), as well as other organisations and individuals, hence, the whole of Thinktank's work depends on partnership working. Currently, Birmingham as a City is significantly under provisioned with respect to the Natural Sciences so we are planning to develop and expand our provision to include not only enhanced museum displays and a presence in the City Park, but also additional school, community and outreach work. This year's NatSCA conference 'Working it out - Collections and Partnerships' was, for these reasons, of great interest and relevance to our developing plans. This short article will briefly explore Thinktank's current partnership arrangements, what was learned from attending the 2008 NatSCA conference, and how this will inform our future plans.

Internally Thinktank is organised into a series of 'teams' that requires partnership working both within and between teams. Regular Team meetings ensure commonality of purpose and guarantee everyone is fully apprised of the undertakings of other team members. Curatorial and display work is undertaken by the Exhibitions and Collections Team, and although communication between team members is excellent, we find it invaluable to hold weekly update meetings. The Exhibitions and Collections Team works closely with other Thinktank teams including: Formal Learning, for schools and booked groups; Informal Learning, which targets our drop in visitors; and Outreach, which takes daily pre-booked shows and workshops to schools and other external venues. Our work is supported by technical teams that maintain exhibits and interactives, and ensure safe, regular running of our historical exhibits (which for Science and Industry includes the world's oldest and third oldest working steam engines). Each Team leader is a member of, or seconded to, the Senior Management Team and this ensures good communication, top to bottom, throughout the organisation.

Thinktank's external partnerships are many and varied. Those critical to the Natural Sciences include our relationships with BM&AG and with the University of Birmingham's Lapworth Museum of Geology (LMG). This latter partnership is crucial, as it is anticipated the City's geology collections, comprising rocks, fossils and minerals, will soon be transferred to the LMG on long-term loan. However, experience shows that it is personal relationships that are so important to a sound working partnership. In this respect the NatSCA conference was excellent – the talks made the faces of speakers familiar and more approachable during breaks. Tea, coffee and lunch breaks were long enough to both refresh yourself and mingle amongst the participants, and the afternoon visits arranged you in one or more groups with a common goal. The wine reception and the annual dinner was an excellent opportunity to wind down, chat and have a drink, and the Saturday post-conference field trip threw participants together in a truly idyllic setting - and the lunch was, in true field centre style, home made and wonderful!

For me, perhaps the most useful programmed talks were those by Sally Smart, the West Yorkshire Police Wildlife Liaison Officer and Gill Stevens of the Natural History Museum in London on the first day, and Naila Akram of RSPB Scotland and Jo Mould of the BTCV on the second day. It was fascinating to hear Sally Smart's presentation on 'Police-Museum Partnerships', and how the Wildlife Crimes Unit was working with other organisations such as the RSPCA, HM Customs and museums, as well as networking and providing public education. I thought this was an interesting alternative 'view from the field' of the value and use of museum collections and staff expertise. Gill Stevens presentation 'Public engagement with science through novel networks' was valuable in attempting to tap into the large amount of information embedded in the amateur community by working in true partnership with various bodies. The museum provided a scientifically sound base, but ensured projects were 'owned' by the societies and their membership and not the Museum – a great lesson for all of us. Her emphasis on the importance of setting clear, shared goals, establishing clear ownership, of long term support such as adequate funding and offering of comple-

mentary skills was well made. The brief mention of the OPAL (OPen Air Laboratories) Network showed that no single approach is universal, the value of evaluating the needs and requirements of partners early in a project, to nurture goodwill and be realistic, share control, make resources sustainable and provide support for participants was excellent. These are lessons that we will undoubtedly take forward in our future endeavours.

In the afternoon I found the tours of the University Library Special Collections, with some truly amazing historical Natural History books, stimulating. The Anatomy Museum was wonderfully specimen led (although not strong on interpretation), but really brings home the value of real material if you want to fully understand a subject as complex as the human body. The tour of the Zoology stores, which covered a huge range of material, was of great interest – and I was never quite sure what would be found round the next corner.

Naila Akram's talk was, for me, was the best of the conference. The HLF funded project to engage visitors within the museum and outside in the adjacent Kelvingrove Park struck me as both innovative and invaluable. It also relates directly to Thinktank's prime position on the doorstep of Birmingham's planned East-side City Park. Naila described using new staff and volunteers to take visitors on a bookable field teaching service, including guided walks and pond dipping. Two information officers are on-gallery 7 days a week providing fun, innovative interactions and guided tours showing endangered wildlife, outreach services and giving monthly talks.

Jo Mould's talk on 'Training the next generation of Naturalists', gave details of a project to train new naturalists in high-level identification and field skills covering specialist areas of the Natural Sciences. This was an excellent partnership between university departments, museums and an active conservation charity. Although too academic for Thinktank's core audience, it gave a fantastic idea of the partnerships that are possible between bodies with different skill sets. Both this and the previous talk reinforced, for me at least, the importance that museum Natural Science collections have for education and enlightenment of audiences of all ages. It also showed the importance of using the outdoors, which can include parks and green spaces close to the museum. This seems particularly important in urban settings like Birmingham where access to wildlife is often limited. Only by engaging with people in these ways can we hope to inspire a new generation of naturalists.

In the afternoon I managed an all too brief run round the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery displays (to which I must return). Thence onto the Fossil Grove, which was an instructive visit to a unique, locally preserved and much loved locality. The Saturday trip to the field centre on Loch Lomond was a chance to get out and experience what museum work sometimes limits – time in the field. Not only a wonderful place to see plants and wildlife, but a site that has erected an interesting new building, the first built within the new National Park regulations, constructed of local materials with a built in low carbon footprint.

My attendance at the NatSCA conference gave me valuable insights into partnership arrangements in a wide range of organisations. I made valuable contacts, and was able to feed important information back to the Collections, Education and Outreach Teams here at Thinktank. Our plans to expand our Natural Sciences provision have undoubtedly been enhanced and we will plan to make full use of Birmingham's new East-side City Park development on our doorstep. Thank you NatSCA!

Institutional Abbreviations and addresses:

BM&AG – Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham B3 3DH

LMG – The Lapworth Museum of Geology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT

Thinktank – the Birmingham Science Museum, Millennium Point, Curzon Street, Birmingham B4 8JZ

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