



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA News

Title: An Overview of Tuesday, June 14th

Author(s): Rogers, D.

Source: Rogers, D. (2005). An Overview of Tuesday, June 14th. *NatSCA News, Issue 6*, 40 - 42.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/291>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

An Overview of Tuesday, June 14th

- Dominique Rogers

I was delighted to be able to attend the whole three days of the really 'talky' part of the SPNHC/ NatSCa conference, thanks to a grant from NatSCa. I had given up the idea of attending at all as I could not decide which day I wanted to be there as everyday had stuff that sounded quite interesting. So this is me singing for my supper, and the breakfast croissants were very good, so was the bag full of goodies such as a camera and what looks like a really nice book published by the National History Museum (NHM) that disappeared to the den of my daughter as soon as I got home. But I seem to have ended up with a day where the subjects treated were a bit far from my immediate concerns and I found a lot of it rather difficult for me to grasp and therefore to report. But I'll try.

The opening speech By **Dr. Richard Lane** who introduced awards and people I had never heard off before and that I probably will not remember, panicked me as to my ability to report the day. As I said before, I am not an 'ist' zoo, bio or otherwise and my main purpose in life seems to pack skeletons of horses and chameleons, comb giraffes, preen or depreen kakapos and revarnish sturgeons. All jobs I enjoy thoroughly. Now when it comes down to taxonomies and molecular analyses, I am not all there.

Lord May (President of the Royal Society) set the day with a clear (even to me) description of the problems besetting the natural sciences chances of ever cataloguing the world and of the need, if the natural scientist community wants to seriously tackle the task, to get together and adopt standards common across the world. It seems that the astronomers have done it (a/ catalogue and publish and b/ do it together) and that their results are getting them the sort of funding that would help greatly to get Natural Sciences on their way to the stars. There are too many people working on vertebrates (but then they are cuddly) and not enough on everything else. There is apparently no way to know what disappears, as we do not know what we have. To interest the young into macro (or was it micro?) biology is an imperative.

Digitise, digitise, digitise, embrace barcodes and new technologies, collections and collecting remain cornerstones; catalogue, catalogue, catalogue all this in a common frame more accessible to more people was the main message of a very accessible speech (I really liked the story of the blue butterflies and the red ants).

Then **Dr. Richard Lane** gave his keynote address and on the day the Museums Association (MA) was releasing its paper 'Collections for the Future' it presumably was seriously up to date. I have not read the report yet but it is probable that de-accessioning comes in heavy if museums are to keep on collecting, rather than become the graveyards of the past 3 or 4 centuries of active collecting, quite often without a lot of forethought. This rather applies to other museums disciplines, I am sure that Natural History collections do not have countless irrelevant duplicates like 28 bean dibbers in a museum that does not actively collect agricultural implements. Of course everybody knows that there are not two moths that are the same. Or are they? According to R. Lane, the chromosome or the pheromones may be the only important things to collect from a scientific point of view and all the pretty little bugs on their corroding pins could be destroyed without a loss to science. It may be difficult to raise governmental grants for the collecting of chromosome (the public might not desperately want to access that kind of collection). Then there was talk of synoptic collections at which point I felt like a short order cook at a cordon bleu convention.

R. Lane's message was about the importance of research and the fact that NMH collections are not so much of historical value, than of helping with the knowledge of the state of the planet. Money would be better employed paying for research rather than 5 minutes of web space. One cannot deny that it sounds right, but then what of the many daily visitors to the museum? Is it not a way to raise awareness of the necessity for research? One could ask if the display of seriously discoloured fur and feather specimens is a good idea if one wants to attract young people to the profession? After all, the magic of attractive objects in museums must have counted for something in the choice of a profession. What enthuses you in your childhood may give you a direction for life. For a post in fine art there are 100s of applicants and no one for Natural History!

Then came the 'Standards'. We are very fortunate in the U.K to already have fairly comprehensive sets of Standards (already quite a few between Benchmarks for Collection Care, SPECTRUM, SHIC and others).

Still it seems that everybody is eager to create his or her own. I thought that the Dublin Core had solved all the problems of metadata and cross-referencing on the web but now there is the Darwin Core (I have been out of touch with the intricacies of the web as the knowledge has to be updated every week to stay current and this is something that as far as I am concerned is solidly in the remit of specialists. I came to think that if one wrote one web site according to W3C (world wide web consortium <www.w3.org>) it would all be all right. It appears that is not the truth or why would everybody try to write and impose their own systems?

There is 'Synthesis', a European project that sounds very much like the Benchmarks from the MLAC, but I guess it has to be translated and adapted to the 26 (?) members of the E.U. or more if you take the long view and try to integrate really everybody in Europe and why stop there? Would not a global project be more compelling and useful? This is what **R. Rabeler** and **J. A. Macklin** were talking about and it sounded great until it started to look like a mild attack of new world imperialism. Perhaps it is this parochial feeling that stops all these wonderful unification projects from getting anywhere. It seems that when confronted with ambitious schemes embracing the world and standardising it all we are not managing to achieve very much (are the cucumbers and bananas straight? Have they conformed to the European standard for bananability?) But at least we could start. In the UK many museums are still struggling with getting their own records in order, let them do that, then talk again? It is true that if our parishes had the same records databases it would be a good start but then as long as they can read each other that should be good enough. If we are all so smart eventually we should arrive at the same standards ... I am not being facetious but the big picture is starting to obscure the bugs in the trees. Discouragement can easily set in if the goals are set too high.

It is easy for the 'Nationals' to set up ambitious projects and sometimes they succeed (by the way, what happened to Multi Mimsy?) but think about the poor local authorities people and their stuffed squirrels; are these large long term goals going to put these collections out of business for lack of moral and financial support? Does it matter in the great research schemes that are Natural sciences? We are back to inspiring the public and especially children to choose to become a scientist rather than an expert in fine art.

Elizabeth Dietrich from the Smithsonian Washington DC, 'Realising New Standards for the Wet Collections Facilities' rather lost me. It sounded like they ran into problems with design, legality, etc. made a plan, had problems, ran out of money and could not complete the plan; the conclusion is: Plan better. The NHM in London seems to be doing fine with its wet collections.

There were some American papers about making friends and influencing people; and one by **V. Gambill** who has just discovered 'Loan Forms'. A long time ago I received a loan form from an American museum from which I wanted to borrow a small 20th century medicine bottle; the form was 57 pages long and even asked the load permitted in our lift (what lift?). So this is not new in the U.S. but quite a few delegates (all American by the sound) were quite interested. It is scary, that the whole of the American Museums community has not achieved what seem to be very basic standards. Perhaps their communication system is not as good as ours?

Tristram Besterman delivered a wonderful paper on sustainable collections, the need to provide evidence of relevance and to connect collections to science and society. He made a very interesting point to pass on to conservators who still advocate keeping collections as far away from use as possible (they are becoming rarer but there are still some) by demonstrating that using collections protects them from decay, getting a chance to look at the collections one is more likely to spot pest infestations or pyrite decay. Sadly the very tight time schedule robbed us of the end of his paper that had to be delivered at a very accelerated pace.

R Huxley and **M. Fitton** talked about the successes of the Darwin Centre among others, in conforming with Health & Safety regulations which, in the case of such a potential big bang in the middle of London are quite justified, gives hope to everybody to be able to cope with what sometimes seems to be an attempt by the nanny state to stop us all from working. If the NHM could solve their giant H&S problem surely we must be able to solve our little ones.

James Macklin (The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, U.S.A.) presented an imaging program called 'ImageMagick' that apparently solves all the imaging problems of putting large images collections on the web. As I said earlier this is really a problem for IT specialists, but it is nice to know that programs better and cheaper are still coming in.

Tiffany Adrain (university of Iowa) offered a very clear presentation on the project to improve the curation standards in palaeontology collections, the survey format that she showed was very useful and I hope to get a copy of the form to put in my collection of functional survey formats.

Unfortunately I was committed to attend a small Japanese lacquer seminar at 6.30 the other side of London so I did not get much of a chance to look at the posters.

In conclusion:

This has rather run away from reviewing the conference, but then this is a personal view and what I got out of it.

Perhaps there were too many papers delivered; one had the impression of running a marathon. To ask questions in front of such a distinguished assembly especially since time was so short you had to be very brave. Thankfully all the delegates are listed in the booklet with the schedule and abstracts provided in the goodies pack. I think somehow I prefer more intimate meetings like the one in Norwich two years ago, (I could not afford the one in Dublin). But really it was a wonderful conference, a moment to reflect on my own 'Standards' and to feel quite satisfied with myself: at least I am trying. Tuesday was good but Wednesday was better and Thursday was wonderful, I finally got a free lunch.

SPNHC visit to the Horniman Museum

- Jo Hatton, Deputy Keeper of Natural History, Horniman Museum

A select few collections managers and conservators from as far a field as Ipswich, Amsterdam and New York were accompanied by Lorraine Cornish from the Natural History Museum south of the river to visit the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill, South London.

The Horniman Museum, named after its founder, the Victorian tea trader Frederick Horniman, opened its doors in 1901, and was dedicated with the surrounding land as a free gift to the people of London by Horniman forever for their recreation, instruction and enjoyment. The original collections comprised natural history specimens, cultural artefacts and musical instruments. Due to the specific natural science orientated interests of the SPNHC audience it was decided to focus on the natural history and conservation aspects of the museum. Various tours of different areas of the museum were organised and took place during the course of the day.

The day started with a tour of the Horniman Gardens by Gordon Lucas, the Garden Manager. Endlessly enthusiastic, he informed the visitors that the garden on its own attracts more than 200,000 visitors a year and is cared for and maintained by a dedicated team of gardeners and volunteers who look after the continually changing displays such as those in the sunken garden throughout the year. Staff are keen to improve links with the museum itself and form one of the partners to the Plant Cultures Project coordinated by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and other Museums. A display of economically important plants from Southern India have been planted along one of the borders with interpretation to help promote cultural links between the public and the museum collections with further information available on the website.

Next a visit to the Environment Room, a space dedicated to promoting links between people and the environment. Lucy-Anne Bishop, the Environment Project Manager informed the visitors of the purpose of the space, which contains a very popular observational beehive, information and reading area and panels of information that focus attention on both local and global conservation issues. It also highlights issues such as sustainable development. It was then a short walk to one of the most innovative museum buildings to be built in recent years – the Centre for Understanding the Environment or CUE building, which opened in 1996. It houses the Education Department and was undergoing work to install the museum library at the time of the visit. CUE is an energy efficient ecologically friendly building built from sustainable resources, complete with grass roof; the building provides a link between the Museum's collections and the living world of the Horniman Gardens.

The afternoon began with a tour of the Conservation Laboratory lead by Louise Bacon and Sherry Doyal, Head and Deputy Head of Collections Conservation and Care. The group were given an overview of the kinds of work undertaken by the section, more specifically in relation to natural history. The conservators carry out most hands-on conservation of natural history material both in the public galleries and in store.