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would have remained an enigma. The specimen in question is undoubtedly poorly preserved and might not be deemed to have much scientific merit. It is however identifiable and when put in its proper biostratigraphical context, provides a vital clue to this problem.

Concluding remarks

Museums play an essential role to play in most aspects of the Natural Sciences, but are especially important in biostratigraphy. As it is still the best means of correlating sedimentary rocks, biostratigraphy is central to the development of our understanding of the geological evolution of the planet. It also plays a vital role in many aspects of economic geology, such as exploration for resources such as oil, coal and gas. The more biologically orientated palaeontology studies normally include photographs of the key specimens. Such images are obviously not the same as the actual specimen, but at least they provide some direct insight into what a palaeontologist is describing and interpreting. Biostratigraphers in contrast usually only have published lists of identifications to work with, which on their own are not enough. They must be able to check the original specimens to confirm their identification, and whose conservation by Museums is therefore crucial.

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A National Strategy for UK Systematic Biology Research

The UK Systematics Forum

Systematic biology, the comparative study of living and fossil organisms, underpins all other natural sciences. It is commonly accepted as being fundamental to the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable development and areas such as pest control, food production and health.

Systematics research is carried out at a large number and wide variety of institutions around the UK, including national, local authority and university museums, botanic gardens and zoos, culture collections, research institutes and universities, and it is funded by a correspondingly wide range of bodies. The structure and organisation of the community is such that a coordinated approach is not easily achieved. A national strategy for systematic biology research aims to strengthen UK systematics by demonstrating its importance and by establishing a community-wide commitment to working in collaboration and co-operating at policy level.

The UK Systematics Forum was set up in 1994 as part of the Government's response to the House of Lords' report on Systematic Biology Research¹. It was initially funded with the broad aim of promoting coordination and communication between the major collections holding institutions and the wider systematics community. In 1996, the Forum was awarded funding for a further period to develop the national strategy.

Aims and objectives of a national strategy

A national strategy for systematic biology research will help to:

- reaffirm the primary value of systematic biology research
- ensure that users' future needs are met effectively
- promote best possible use of available resources
- enhance co-operation and collaboration between institutions
- strengthen the case for funding
- create a powerful voice for UK systematics

As in many areas of public spending, resources are limited. The strategy therefore needs to demonstrate what the systematics community is doing to ensure that the best possible use is being made of existing resources as well as showing clear priorities for where new funding should be directed. By increasing collaboration between institutions and presenting a clear case for what additional resources could achieve, the strategy will help strengthen the case for funding and for systematics.

The national strategy document will set out:

- what systematics is and why it is needed;

1 Systematic Biology Research, HL Paper 22-I, HMSO, 1992.

- what the main objectives and priorities for systematics research are;
- what is needed to achieve these objectives (in terms of training and education, information technology, networking, raising awareness and funding), and;
- how to implement the strategy.

Finally it will set out what the systematics community is committed to doing towards the strategy and make recommendations for action by others.

Developing the strategy

The strategy is being developed by a process of gathering information — on user needs, UK expertise, and institutions' collections policies — pooling expertise to draft a series of objectives, targets and action points; and then further shaping these into a strategy through a process of consultation with the wider systematics community, user groups and policy makers.

A survey of user needs was carried out by a market research group who interviewed a number of users from a wide variety of sectors; commercial, conservation, funding bodies, government departments, research, environmental consultancy and publishing. A summary of their report can be found on the Forum's Home Pages at (<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/uksf>). Many of the findings of the survey were to be expected although it has clearly demonstrated the common misunderstanding of what systematics is, even among other scientists.

The Forum aimed to complete the first draft national strategy by the end of August '97. This draft will form the framework for debate at a series of meetings to be held as part of the consultation process. Systematists registered on the database of UK expertise and user groups will be invited to regional meetings to discuss and input to the Strategy. Funding bodies and other user groups will be invited to a series of three seminars being held at The Natural History Museum, the Royal Botanic Gardens' Kew and Edinburgh, to raise awareness of the issues and build support for the Strategy. Specialist groups, such as BCG and GCG will also be invited to submit comments on the draft document.

Input from these groups will feed into the final document and be presented to the Directors of the major collections-holding institutions in December '97. The final document will be launched in March 1998 and be followed by a plan to implement the Strategy during the remainder of the year. During this time the Forum will also be looking for an institution to take over funding and hosting the Forum during its perceived future role in overseeing the implementation of the Strategy.

A National Strategy will only succeed if it is developed with consensus from the systematics community and policy makers. Anybody wishing to contribute to the developing document is therefore encouraged to attend the regional meetings.

For further information on these or other Forum activities please contact E. Watson at UK Systematics Forum, c/o The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Rd, London, SW7 5BD (e-mail: ew@nhm.ac.uk) or view the Forum's Home Pages at: <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/uksf>.

Inter-Departmental Curatorial Exchanges at the Natural History Museum, London

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Abstract

Curator exchanges can be an economical and practical way of sharing skills and experience. Decreases in funding coupled with the emergence of museum standards initiatives such as the Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC)'s Registration Scheme means that improved communication between and within museums is a particularly important issue. This paper describes a curator exchange between the Departments of Botany and Entomology in The Natural History Museum, London, and discusses some of the benefits and problems.

Background

The exchange described here is part of a curation training programme at the Natural History Museum, London. In the Museum, curators have exchanged within groups in the same department, between museums, and now between departments. In the Entomology Department, curators have spent some of their time expanding their knowledge and skills by working with new groups of insects. In July 1993, a curator from the Museum's Botany Department went to work in the Missouri Botanical Garden and the New York Botanical Garden for a month. The arrangement was reciprocal and a return exchange is expected. This paper describes a trial exchange between the Departments of Botany and Entomology.

Details

This exchange involved the participants working half of their time in each department over a six month period between November 1996 and May 1997. It was not a direct job swap. A variety of projects were designed to present the two participants with unfamiliar techniques and procedures.

Botany (Julia Pope)

In Botany, the exchange tasks covered a variety of curatorial activities including laying out, laying in, plant mounting, re-curation and databasing. The process of laying out specimens requires some understanding of the main characteristics of plant groups and the most effective ways of displaying them. Actually mounting the plants was useful in terms of learning about the techniques and materials involved.

Various herbarium arrangements are employed; the algae arranged alphabetically within major groups, the ferns and flowering plants according to various publications and lists. Laying in specimens in different parts of the collection