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Author(s): Carter, J.

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Accreditation - a professional qualification for museum conservators?

The United Kingdom Institute for Conservation (UKIC) and other British conservation groups are developing plans for the introduction of a professional qualification for all conservators. Recently Bob Entwhistle and Simon Moore of the Natural Science Conservation group (NSCG) summarised the situation in a letter to the membership of the NSCG;

"UKIC and the other conservation groups expect to have a system of accreditation for conservators up and running by the year 2000. An accredited conservator will be expected to;

- *comply with employment and health and safety regulations*
- *to be technically competent*
- *to be professional in his/her conduct*
- *to abide by a code of ethics*

It is the aim of the UKIC and the other main Conservation organisations to have one accreditation system for all British conservators."

The current processes of how this is exactly going to work have yet to be fully explored but at the time of this letter the following process was summarised;

"..there will a fast track system for established conservators with over 10 years experience in conservation.

- *Time spent in education will be taken into account but only if the course is a conservation course. Biology and Zoology, for instance, will not count as a conservation course.*

- *It is hoped that this will provide a tool of accredited conservators who can help assess other conservators.*

- *Conservators wishing to be accredited by the fastrack method will need at least two sponsors who know their work to act as referees. They will be assessed by their 'peers' on work they have done/are doing. [The assessment will follow MTI's analysis of competence as they apply to the applicants current job].*

- *The normal accreditation system will be similar but longer.*

Accreditation will cost £200 and accredited conservators will have to be members of UKIC, membership of which presently stands at £60 per annum."

It is expected that a consultant will be appointed to draw up the final procedure, and the scheme is expected to be fully implemented from June 1999.

So where does the NSCG feel they stand on this issue? At the start of the letter it was stated that although the NSCG had a member on the Conservation Forum Committee, the group was too small to have enough influence to change the proposed accreditation scheme to suit the NSCG membership. It was also felt;

"The committee feel that our group is not yet large enough, or financially strong enough to create their own scheme. Providing the UKIC scheme is flexible enough to accommodate natural sciences, we think it would be sensible for interested NSCG members to apply via this scheme.

We think that accreditation may soon be an essential requirement for those in freelance work, and it will be a long term investment for those who require insurance for this type of work. Whether the insurance premium would fall by as much as the annual membership of UKIC remains to be seen. Bob and Simon feel that the work would be more forthcoming to those who are classed as accredited conservators.

It should be stressed that accreditation is not mandatory, but it may be to the advantage of some members, principally those with the word 'conservator' in their job title."

The rest of the letter dealt with future discussions and means of obtaining the required documents from UKIC. Any UKIC member is eligible to apply for 'fast track' accreditation if they wish.

The above summarises very briefly the proposed mechanisms for accreditation in conservation. The amount of material actually written on the subject is somewhat more voluminous! To read it all would mean cancelling your life for a while.....

As an actual practising museum conservator, specialising in zoological collections, I have a number of serious queries over this accreditation process;

- **Existing qualification:** It has been stated that only conservation based qualification will be taken into consideration for 'fast track' accreditation. This means that my existing degree in Environmental Biology will not count towards my training when in reality it should. A conservator can only practise their work to a competent level if they understand their subject. My training in a biological degree provides this, along with a strong background in chemistry. This is of far more value in work conserving zoological collections than a standard conservation degree .

- **Assessment:** There are few dedicated natural science conservators and I am one of them. It would be difficult to find suitably qualified referees to carry out the assessment. There currently appears to be no provision in dealing with the more specialist groups in the conservation field.

- **UKIC membership:** This is a body that has already let natural science conservation down in the past with its 'professional' reforms in its constitution. I cannot see UKIC adopting a flexibility that would be beneficial to a small and specialist section such as the natural sciences, especially as it is a section with little 'political' clout.

- **Cost:** £60 to join UKIC plus a further £200 to become accredited is all very well. However I am certain that a professional qualification will not provide a professional wage! It is also becoming apparent that in order to remain accredited you will have to stay a member of the UKIC - no membership, no accreditation.

Where a specialist and outlying section of the conservation profession such as the natural sciences fits into the accreditation process is still unclear, especially in view of the very limited amount of subject related training that is available. However it does appear that the Natural Science Training Scheme, that is currently run between the University of Cambridge, the Natural History Museum and the National Museum of Wales, is going to be endorsed by the MTI and will be an acceptable part of a conservators

training programme. However I teach on this course so where does that put me?

One cannot condone the effort that is being made to provide training and acceptable qualification, but with all this effort in trying to develop training are we losing sight of our actual roles in a sea of paperwork, certificates and bureaucracy?

Julian Carter

Zoological Conservation Officer

Folk Charms

A PhD student at University College Worcester is interested in the history of folk magic in the early modern period (16th and 17th centuries). He would like information on the following types of specimens which may have been deliberately concealed in buildings and which may have found their way into museum zoology collections:

horse skulls

any other animal bones

or mummified cats, dogs or vermin

Also witch-bottles (containing traces of urine), witch-stones or any other folk charms. He is also interested in any literary references.

Please reply to:

Brian Hoggard, 63 The Limes, Kempsey,
Worcester, WR5 3LG

Fungi Displays

The British Mycological Society has recently set up an Education Group with the remit of promoting mycology to as wide an audience as possible. As one of their efforts in assessing the impact of fungi in the UK, they are currently undertaking a survey of museums throughout the country. The idea behind this is to find which museums have displays on fungi and what those displays are. Eventually it is hoped to build up a directory of museums with items in mycological interest, and incorporate some of the best exhibits into a "virtual" museum of mycology on the WWW.

If your museum has displays on fungi we would be grateful to hear from you, and if you could give some indication of the nature of the display we would value that even more. If you don't have fungal displays we would still like to hear from you, particularly if you could give an indication of why this is the case. And if you don't have fungi on display in your museum but you would like to, please contact us and we may be able to help.

The co-ordinators of this project is Gordon Rutter, who can be reached at Royal Botanic Garden, 20A Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5LR.

Or by e-mail on g.rutter@rbge.org.uk or gordon@rutter.freeseerve.co.uk

National Biodiversity Network News

Software progress

Stuart Ball reports that work on Recorder 2000 began on 14 December 1998 and that the first two deliverables have been sent out for comment. These are the Database and Mapping tool feasibility studies. The map tool study has recommended using a desktop mapping library called MapServer 4, which can import and display a wide range of GIS formats. It can also export to MapInfo, Atlas GIS and in Windows Metafile formats (.WMF and .EMF). Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) and the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) in Belfast have been selected to co-ordinate user involvement in design and testing.

If you want to examine the prototypes, they can be found on the Web at <http://www.nbn.org.uk/projects/rec2000>. At the website there is a facility where you can register as a tester (for existing Recorder users). The idea is that software will be made available as prototypes and beta versions for those registered.

Compiled from an e-mail from Stuart Ball (JNCC) by Steve Garland, Bolton Museum.

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Editors: Patricia Francis and Kathryn Berry

Contributions should be sent to: The Editors, Biology Curator's Group, Natural History Section, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, Le Mans Crescent, Bolton BL1 1SE. Tel: 01204 522311 Ext. 2197. Fax: 01204 391352.

E.Mail: bolmg@gn.apc.org. (Please send on disc using Word for Windows or ASCII-file with hard copy).

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