The Biology Curator

Title: Networking Collections: Can we make it work?

Author(s): Dawson, D.

Source: Dawson, D. (2001). Networking Collections: Can we make it work?. *The Biology Curator*, *Issue 20*, 24.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/853

marks the point at which technology and museums, (computers and society) connect in a mutually transforming way.

Finally, John Hopwood's presentation of new Virtual Reality technologies will reminds of yet more lessons we need to have as part of our on-going *Digital Learning*. For what the innovative work of Education City is doing (in Leicester) in its interactive, low-cost experiences for lifelong learners (what elsewhere has been called its '*Knowledge Space*') is quite literally rethinking the space of the museum. The thought processes at the kernel of the creative networked virtual reality products that John Hopwood's team are building, raise questions about the very essence of what museums are, and what the are trying to do.

Museums have always been associated with Technology. After all, in one sense, they are themselves a technology of sorts; a medium, a physical form of communication. Indeed, over the centuries our museums, libraries and archives (our 'memory institutions') have found their beginnings and shaped their changing roles at the same time as they also found new ways to present, process and protect their objects and ideas. From the cabinet of curiosity to the tableaux diorama, and from the glass-fronted display case to the hands-on interactive, and from the punch card catalogue to the database management system ... communication technology continues to inform and support the purpose and practice of the museum world. The histories of museums, and the histories of their mediating technologies are inextricably linked. To tell a story of museums is to tell a story (also) of the technologies they contain. This has certainly been the case (at least) for the technology that is the subject of these discussions - *digital information technology*. It is the proximity of this digital technology to the construction and representation of knowledge, which is the theme that sits at the very heart of these papers here. Within this theme are fundamental issues for museums today: who they are for, what they contain, what form they take? We cannot avoid the series of questions and issues centred upon the role of new technology - in particular those challenges centred upon the portable, programmable, automated, digital-

processing machines we call computers. How and why may we talk about a 'virtual museum'? To whom would it serve, and in what way? How do the processes, roles and skills of curatorship change in such a setting? Who should fund such innovation? For what benefit, as museum professionals, do we enter the digital age? It is to these questions, these issues and these challenges that this discussion looks. It is a discussion about new beginnings; new approaches to the way we work, and new approaches to the way we sustain this work. It is about new standards, new protocols and new partnerships. It is a discussion about new potentials, new visions, and even, perhaps, new museums.

Networking Collections Can we make it work?

David Dawson -
Senior ICT Advisor, Re:source

Much is talked about the power of IT to unlock the huge potential of natural history collections, but is it possible? David Dawson discussed the issues and some of the projects that are attempting to make this a reality.

True to the spirit of this meeting David's talk is available online both in HTML and as a Powerpoint presentation. It can be accessed at www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/team/dawson/present.html.