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The Biology Curator

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which discussion is easily handled and work can be felt to be shared. There is also benefit in retaining this directness of link with the parent body.

Although we do want, and need, to retain our focus on the larger collections, we recognise that we must try not to be elitist. There are two main ways we aim to avoid this. The first is to make known the initiatives that we are identifying before we actually start on them, so that others can have a chance to suggest modifications, and the second is to try to offer any benefits that may result from our own cooperations to as wide a range of insect collections as we can. In fact these ways of trying to consider the needs and aspirations of smaller collections within the framework identified by focusing on the large ones are closely connected, and they will depend on our making reports of our progress to The Biology Curator and on the readers who have a view contacting one of us to have their input taken to our next meeting.

So here is a brief report. The group has met twice (at the Natural History Museum on 2nd March 1995, and at Oxford University Museum on 20th September 1995 – our next meeting will be at the National Museum of Ireland on 22nd March 1996) and has started to discuss the following:

(1) **Intentions to database holdings.** Agreed priorities: (a) Primary types at specimen level; (b) Taxa held (not at specimen level) for British Collections. Agreed that a common database, in concert with revised checklists of British Insects, needed before the second project can start in earnest.

(2) **Taxonomic Database for British Insects.** Following from the above. To serve for collections management, nature conservation, and to generate checklists. Recognition of needs for unification, and efforts to promote this.

(3) **Storage systems.** Promotion of standardization of size and specification to cut costs. Possible exchanges.

(4) **Curatorial supplies.** Bulk ordering/brokerage possibilities.

(5) **Legislation affecting insect collections and their management.** Information exchange, e.g. Lacey Act in USA.

(6) **Collecting/disposal policies (including acceptance of donations/bequests).** Information exchange.

(7) **Prospects for rationalisation of collections.** Analysis of options; starting to prepare summaries of holdings. General agreement that certain exotic holdings probably currently in the wrong place.

(8) **Pest control.** Two-day seminars are being run at NHM: anyone involved in Natural history curation wanting to go on one should contact Phil Ackery (0171 938 9346).

(9) **Policies for DNA and other destructive sampling.** NHM has policies in draft which may provide a suitable standard.

(10) **Services charged for.** Information exchange.

(11) **Prospects for cooperation/coordination in recruitment.** To be discussed.

Many of the above are more or less ongoing or open-ended issues, and are to be kept under review. Anyone wanting to find out more, or make a comment, is encouraged to contact any of us. Below is a list of the membership of the group, with phone, fax and e-mail details.

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SPECTRUM: Rallying to the Standard

SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard, published by the Museum Documentation Association (MDA), has been out in the museum community for well over a year now and is becoming established as a valuable tool for anyone working with collections. As familiarity with SPECTRUM grows, more and more museums are incorporating it into their working practice. Museums have already used SPECTRUM in producing procedures manuals, writing policy reviews, drawing up job specifications, and generally

improving their procedures. But has SPECTRUM reached its full potential? Whilst aiming to provide a standard for all museums, does SPECTRUM meet all its targets? Does it address all its audiences? If not, how can it develop further to be of even greater value to the museum community?

In essence, SPECTRUM is the crystallisation of the skills and expertise of the UK museum community, brought together through a series of working groups that addressed various areas of activity. And the museum community can be rightly proud of SPECTRUM. It is a world first in a number of important ways. It takes a procedural approach; looking at what actually happens to objects in a museum context, and then dealing with how to handle the information associated with those procedures. By identifying twenty discrete procedures it covers all aspects of collections documentation, and is not limited just to cataloguing items. However, the most important aspect of the co-operative origin of SPECTRUM is the fact that it is accessible and relevant to all museums, regardless of their size or type, or what systems they use to document their collections. This is achieved by defining standards for museums to attain, without being prescriptive about how to achieve them.

This universality of SPECTRUM can be seen as its greatest strength, allowing everyone to use it on equal terms. However, to include options to deal with every occasion does tend to make it appear a little unwieldy. For most of the individuals using SPECTRUM this is not a problem. It is well suited to their everyday requirements, and even to their less common ones, and where there is too much detail, they can make their own selection of what to include. On the other side of the coin, the value of SPECTRUM to the generalist, needing to know a certain amount about most things, can seem to be a limitation for the specialist, with requirements that are so specific to his or her area of interest that they are not included. The fact that SPECTRUM works well for the majority of its users does not mean that it cannot be further developed for the benefit of specialist groups. Natural historians certainly have specialist needs and requirements.

SPECTRUM only has value if it is useful, so it is essential that it

continues to progress and develop to meet the demands of the museum community. Feedback from users of SPECTRUM is essential to steer change in the right direction. At MDA's Workshop in October 1994 a number of discussion sessions gave natural scientists a chance to look at how SPECTRUM could be extended to meet their needs. One conclusion was that there would be value in developing a set of guidelines to SPECTRUM for natural scientists. It was envisaged that any guidelines would give a natural sciences interpretation of SPECTRUM, giving extra or natural science specific information where appropriate, and selecting out other material not relevant.

Now that the museum community has acquired some experience in using SPECTRUM, Louise Smith, MDA's Assistant Director, is setting up working groups to begin to look at such subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM. She would welcome hearing from anyone interested in contributing to this process, or with any other suggestions on the direction of SPECTRUM's future developments.

Another area where there is a growing demand for standardisation is that of terminology for the natural sciences. It is well understood that consistency and accuracy are needed in any record keeping, and that this is of particular value in any subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM. Whilst questions of terminology are beyond the specific remit of SPECTRUM, it is a truism that no matter how good procedures are, if you put in poor data, you can only get poor information out.

Natural historians have an advantage over many other curators in having internationally accepted sets of names for the things they deal with. Added to this BCG has been active in promoting good practice in managing biological collections. Where does MDA, with a role to promote excellence in documentation in museums, fit into this framework? MDA does not have the expertise in individual subject areas, such as botany or zoology, to produce thesauri and termlists. Nor would it seek to. It can much more usefully serve the museum community by helping those with the knowledge to share their knowledge, and help make the resources produced as widely available

as possible. This way of collaborative working successfully produced SPECTRUM and is the model that MDA will follow in developing terminology resources.

In all these developments, MDA is dependent on feedback from people actually using the resources at the "dust face" in museums. Comments made at MDA's Workshop have already influenced the way SPECTRUM will be taken forward, but more views and observations are welcomed. The larger the number of individuals contributing to the process, the more closely SPECTRUM and terminology resources will meet the needs of their users. Another conduit for feedback is MDA's proposed network of SPECTRUM Advisors. These would be individuals well versed in SPECTRUM prepared to be the first point of call for others trying to get to grips with the subject. While it would be preferable to have an even geographical spread of Advisors, a full coverage of all the different subject areas in museums is more important, so that, for example, biologists know there is someone who understands their particular needs to talk to about SPECTRUM and its implementation. By being in closer touch with day-to-day users, the Advisors will be an important link in ensuring that grass roots views are heard.

So to return to the questions posed at the start, SPECTRUM is there and can work for all the varied users museums, but maybe needs more detail in some areas for some people. MDA is working to deal with these reservations by producing subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM, setting up a network of SPECTRUM Advisors and making available a range of terminology resources. These initiatives are all at an early stage, so if you would like to influence them or just find out more, please contact Louise Smith at MDA in Cambridge on 01223 242848.

Nick Goff, MDA Regional Outreach Manager

REPORT ON STUDY TRIP TO BELGIUM

or

"BRUSSELS; I NEVER KNEW THERE WAS SO MUCH IN IT"

Wednesday 8th November: Getting there. I was looking forward to this trip. Previously I had formed the impression that Belgium (like Wales)