

Developing a Subject Specialist Network for the Natural Sciences

Background

One of the key drivers behind the formation of NatSCA was the recognition that natural sciences in Britain needed a stronger voice and would be better served by a larger organisation rather than a number of disparate groups. While NatSCA has a national scope, it was recognised that there was a clear need for a national network of natural science curators and institutions to take projects forward on a local, regional and national level.

In the NatSCA response to the Museums Association consultation paper 'Collections for the Future' it was agreed that a network of subject specialists would be of great benefit. It was noted that a diverse number of formal and informal Subject Specialist Networks such as NatSCA and the Geology Curators Group (GCG) as well as more specialist groups for entomology, herbarium, vertebrate palaeontology etc, already existed. There is however little co-ordination or linkage between these organisations at a national or regional level.

It was also noted that the members run many of these groups on their own time or with goodwill of their employers.

A great deal has been achieved by groups such as NatSCA, GCG, and previously the Biology Curators Group and Natural Sciences Conservation Group, through running of conferences, training, seminars and newsletters, journals and other publications. This is (and was) often limited by resources, both time members can commit to projects and finances.

The two current main bodies are the Natural Sciences Collections Association and Geology Curators Groups. Both have a national scope, producing publications, organising meetings, seminars and training.

Both groups are very successful in what they do but have identified a clear need for strong regionally based institutional networks to take natural sciences forward. Some regional groups already exist such as the recently developed West Midlands group, as well as some groups based on the old Collections Research Units. There is however no one clear coherent model or standards and no linkage or networking between these disparate groups.

Subject Specialist Networks

The Renaissance in the Regions report published in 2001 identified the need to 'develop national subject/discipline based networks' that would enable museums to share skills and expertise and to work together to make more effective use of their collections for the benefit of audiences.

To this end the MLA allocated £20,000 for SSN Exploratory Grants, with individual grants of up to £4,000, to enable museums to explore the establishment or further development of an SSN and for SSN Implementation Grants (up to £35,000) to enable existing SSN's to develop further and implement specific elements of their plans.

NatSCA developed a framework partnership to support a grant bid, including The Natural History Museum, National Museums Liverpool, and museums from the Regional Hubs. The aim of the bid was to develop a framework for a national network based on the major regions of the UK. Using the West Midlands and Yorkshire Natural Sciences Working Group as models, but incorporating NatSCA, NHM and other relevant bodies the bid was to investigate the feasibility of such a network and to prepare a forward plan to indicate how this pilot could be extended to all regions, and the production of a business plan for the activities the network would undertake.

A Subject Specialist Network for the Natural Sciences

The overall vision for the proposed SSN is that of a strategic national body for the natural sciences. It would be formed as a collegiate network based on museums, allied institutions and relevant special interest groups working at a regional level with a national steering group composed of representatives from the regions, national museums, museum organisations (NatSCA, GCG) and national bodies with a strong interest in natural science collections.

Aim

The SSN will function as a strategic administrative body to develop, organise and sustain projects on a national scale and promote collaborative effort at a regional and national level. It will focus on national priorities and projects with long-term objectives, which will enhance collections care, research, interpretation and public understanding and involvement with the natural sciences.

Objectives

Four core areas have been identified as priorities for the SSN.

Collections Care and Development

- Act as a coordinating group for developing national projects for collections care, access and development.
- Foster links and partnerships between museums, institutions and other groups of interest
- Assess current and future needs of collections and provide guidance

Staffing and Staff Development

- Improve skills
- Assess current and future needs of staff
- Develop core competencies and ensure continuity of expertise.
- Support and facilitate opportunities for staff development across the network.

Advocacy

While not functioning directly as a campaigning body the SSN will look to collate and provide information on the state of natural sciences to help inform national, regional and local government and increase public understanding of the value and importance of museum natural science collections.

- Act as advocate for natural science collections through targeted national projects and research
- Publish in non-specialist journals and magazines
- Collections support

Access and Interpretation

- Gallery Evaluation
- Audience Development
- Temporary Exhibitions
- Facilitate loans
- Collections Access Projects

What the SSN would not be

The proposed role for the SSN is one of that of a national organising body for projects and research with a national remit. It is not proposed that the SSN would function as:

- A campaigning body: it is not initially thought that the SSN would be a campaigning body and that this would fall more within the remit of NatSCA and GCG. This may however change as the SSN develops.
- Replacement organisation or to subsume NatSCA, GCG or other specialist bodies.
- Source of advice – This would remain within the remit of NatSCA, GCG though may become a function of the SSN organisation at a regional group level.
- Conference and seminar organiser

Proposed Organisational Structure

It is proposed that the SSN be organised around three main groupings:

- Regional groups based on the Renaissance in the Regions Hub administrative areas plus Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- National Museums - Natural History Museum, London; National Museums Liverpool; National Museums & Galleries Wales; National Museums Scotland
- Cognate bodies – NatSCA, GCG

Regional Groups

The regional groups would form the main functional component of the SSN. The hub regions would form the basic geographical unit for regional SSN groups in England. Museums in Scotland, Wales

and Northern Ireland will need to determine the appropriate scale for organisation within their respective countries.

A number of regional groups already exist, some are new such as the Natural Sciences Group in West Midlands, and some regional groups remain as holdovers from the old Collections Research Units (CRU's) such as the Yorkshire and Humber Collections Research Unit. At present most regional groups, where they exist, meet infrequently and with varying degrees of formality.

A second regional group that may need to be considered is that of the university museums, who may consider organising as a distinct group within the SSN framework. A proposal for a University Museum SSN was submitted but unsuccessful. It was suggested that this be considered as part of a wider SSN.

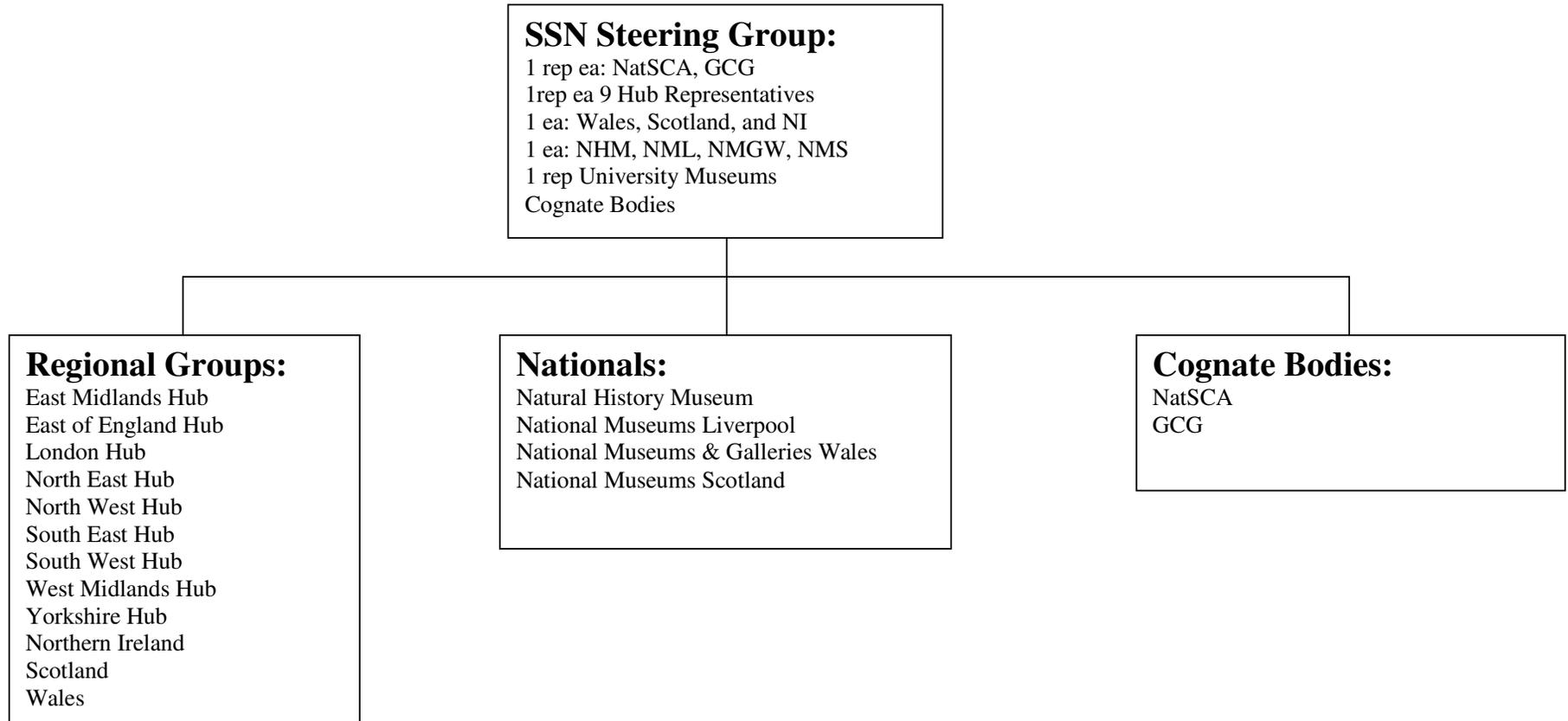
A key question therefore is how do groups organise on a regional basis within the hub or country units? Who is eligible to join these regional groups, what structure would they take and how would they be supported and administered at a regional level?

Rather than impose a top down solution it is felt that regional groups develop their own structure and method of working. The opportunity should be taken to support and develop existing specialist networks, rather than re-invent the wheel, and develop groups where there is an identified gap. It is likely that a model for a regional group structure would come out of this consultation.

National Steering Group

A national steering group would be developed to direct the work of the SSN. It is proposed that the steering group be composed of one representative from each of the regional groups, one member from each of the national museums, one member from NatSCA and GCG and University Museums, and one member from relevant national cognate bodies.

1 Natural Sciences Subject Specialist Network – Proposed Structure



Issues to Consider

- Funding: How will the SSN be funded at a regional and national level?
- Organisation – regional and national. : How will regional groups be formulated and work?
Is the proposed national steering group a viable model?
- Institutional agreement/sign-up: NatSCA is mainly dependent on individual and institutional goodwill to operate. How can institutional agreement to the concept and principles of the SSN be obtained?
- Sustainability: How can the work of the SSN be sustained?
- Dissemination: How will information be disseminated to all partners?
- Re-inventing the wheel? : Do we need and SSN? Could closer working between NatSCA and GCG achieve the same results?

Priorities

In the NatSCA response to the MA Collections For the Future report priority areas for an SSN to address were identified as:

- National Standards for collections care, data standards, data capture,
- Developing new and entry level curatorial staff
- Identification skills – a key requirement within the natural sciences and sorely lacking from most degree courses.
- Improved sharing of curatorial expertise
- Large scale joint projects both specific, e.g. catalogue of weevils in British Collections, and more general
- Peer review of performance
- Quality circles
- Ability to work nationally
- Touring exhibitions – touring exhibitions beyond blockbusters seem to be almost exclusively art focused
- Purchase and sharing of significant collections objects e.g. coelacanth

The main priority was felt to be updating and improving FENSCORE.