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A survival strategy for natural science collections: The role of advocacy



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Abstract

Natural science collections and the specialist staff that work with them provide an important resource for addressing globally important issues, but that message is poorly communicated. In this period of financial depression there is a growing need for advocacy as the sector faces the budget and staffing cuts that can lead to neglect and the loss of collections. At a strategic level collections are best protected through demonstrable use, overt demand, and useful resulting outputs. The contribution of natural science collections to key science policy issues should be used to influence policy makers who affect support for collections. To achieve this, the importance of collections needs to be raised at local, regional and national levels and it falls to natural science collections professionals to make that happen.

Keywords: Advocacy; Policy; Management; Strategy; Funding; Governance

Introduction

Natural science collections often regard themselves as the Cinderella of the museum world – hard working, beautiful and intrinsically good, but oppressed by unsympathetic forces and unable to fulfil their potential. The role of oppressor may fall to an unsympathetic museum management or local authority representative with little appreciation for the relevance of natural science collections, and sadly Fairy Godmothers are not particularly forthcoming in real life. The harsh reality is that natural science collections often rely on ephemeral external advocates, missing the fact that collections are best advocated by the people that use them.

This Cinderella complex has been well established for decades, but has become more problematic since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007. The organisations charged with supporting, regulating and advocating for the museum sector have faced year-on-year cuts in funding, with all the restructuring, reorganisation and outsourcing of staff and services associated with reduced income. For instance, the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) was disbanded and its museums role handed to Arts Council England (ACE) in May 2012.

This saw the effective dissolution of the MLA Regional Hub Network, which had provided a useful advocacy structure, and the introduction of a more focussed major grant programme for regional museums, with Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) like the Natural Science Collections Association (NatSCA) encouraged by ACE to take on more of an advocacy role.

The open application grants from ACE provide a less even distribution of support to regions than the MLA Hub system, but they allow for more effective use of the ever decreasing government funding made available to ACE where they are awarded. In light of the cuts that local authorities and central government have made over the last half-decade this equates to a patchy national landscape of dearth and relative plenty, where ‘plenty’ means a focus on project working, but with reduced ongoing infrastructure support. Unsurprisingly this funding situation has had a significant impact on individual museums in the UK, often forcing hard decisions about organisational structure, staffing and service provision (Evans, 2012) and ultimately the ability to remain open (Steel, 2012).

Natural science collections are seen as particularly at risk when organisations face restructuring and staff cuts – partly because they are highly vulnerable to pest attack or environmental deterioration and require regular monitoring by trained staff – but also because they tend to contain large numbers of specimens, covering a wide spectrum of different specialist areas, requiring specialist knowledge to effectively use. This creates a knowledge gap that can lead to problems for the effective use of the collections, which may have an impact when the next round of cuts call for further hard decisions.

Role of advocacy

When hard decisions are being considered, the value of advocacy becomes apparent. Buy-in from the decision makers, or their reticence to fly in the face of a concerted vocal professional and public opposition, provides the incentive to seek alternative, more imaginative or compromise solutions to problems. Collections without strong advocates are soft targets, lacking the defence of vocal allies and making them particularly vulnerable when hard decisions are made.

Where cuts are rolling year-on-year, restructuring and changes in service provision lay the groundwork for the focus of future cuts, by weakening existing internal and external advocacy structures and shifting the terms upon which alliances have been built. Often this will be an unforeseen and unfortunate consequence, but in some instances there may be an element of ‘divide and conquer’ at play. A conscious awareness of the importance of advocacy is of particular relevance in such instances, in order to challenge the threat of *fait accompli* decisions being presented for collections.

In theory, natural science collections should be in a strong position in terms of advocates and allies. Natural history as a subject is hugely popular in the UK - for example when the first episode of the BBC wildlife documentary *Planet Earth* aired in the UK it was watched by 9.41 million people (BARB, 2013), around 15% of the country's entire population. This interest seems to also hold for museum audiences, with natural history as the highest rated topic of interest in a comprehensive survey of the London museums market (London Museums Hub, 2008), and anecdotal evidence compiled from mixed collection museums suggesting that natural history displays are among the most popular galleries with the public (Ashby *pers. comm.*, 2012). At time of writing audience research is being undertaken on behalf of NatSCA, with support from ACE, in order to further understand the public appeal of natural history in relation to other subjects in mixed museum exhibition galleries. Aside from popular public support, one might expect natural science collections to be vocally supported by the wide variety of professionals who use collections for research and reference, from population geneticists and taxonomists to archaeologists and artists.

However, despite the wide appeal and research value of natural science collections, they receive little recognition from the wider cultural sector and, perhaps more surprisingly, there is little acknowledgement of their contribution in academic and media circles. We need to identify why this is the case, and consider what we can do about it, since acknowledgement of worth by stakeholders underpins advocacy.

Solutions waiting to happen

One issue with the cultural sector is that few of the decision makers are from a natural sciences background, or when they are, they often bring their management experience from non-museum institutions and don't have a collections background. This means that influential advocates for natural science collections are scarce at higher levels within the cultural sector. Challenging this requires short and long term solutions.

In the long term we need to look to ourselves as professionals and recognise that our attitude towards, and decisions about, career progression shape our professional environment. Many of us have the skills and ability to take on management roles, but lack the inclination, especially if they take us away from our collections. This needs to change, although how that change might be brought about is beyond the scope of this article and will require a body of work on careers in the museum sector and the motivation and skills of natural science collections professionals.

In the short term we need to ensure that we communicate far more effectively with decision makers in the cultural sector about what natural science collections can do. This might be achieved in a variety of ways – sharing activities online or in the museum literature, collaborating with artists to produce high-profile exhibitions, or by overtly linking collections-based research to policy issues (Suarez & Tsutsui, 2004). Examples such as the egg-shell work that led to the banning of DDT or heavy metal contamination of bird feathers that led to a ban on alkyl-mercury fungicides (US EPA, 1975; Rocque & Winkler, 2005) provide excellent high-profile demonstrations of the potential contribution of natural science collections to top-level policy issues. Similarly, current population genetic work by species conservationists (e.g. Wandeler *et al.*, 2007; Russello *et al.*, 2010; Edwards *et al.*, 2013) and discoveries of new species (Helgen *et al.*, 2013) offer demonstrations of actual and potential uses of collections, while research that links collections to buzz-topics like climate change (Parmesan *et al.*, 1999; Peterson, *et al.*, 2002; Reutter, *et al.*, 2003; Lister *et al.*, 2011; Robbirt *et al.*, 2011) help wed collections into the concepts of Ecosystem Services (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) and Natural Capital, which are gaining political credibility, as shown by the establishment of the Natural Capital Committee in response to the Government's Natural Environment White Paper (NCC, 2012).

Such examples may prove easier to demonstrate if the academic press and the wider media more actively acknowledged the role of natural science collections in art and science. It seems that collections are often simply taken for granted; a resource that can be used for inspiration, research or reference, but a resource that has always been there and (the assumption follows) always will be. However, the real issue may simply come down to reporting about use of collections. It is not uncommon for academic research to yield important results using specimens from a variety of collections (including specimens from small organisations), only for the people managing the collections involved to not be informed about the publication of those results. Moreover, press releases and subsequent media reporting will often focus on outcomes and their implications, but miss the pivotal role that collections have played in research. Finally, collections professionals can sometimes underplay the importance of the contribution of their specimens because multiple other sources have also been used, or the bulk of data was collected in a larger institution. This modesty is inappropriate, since all contributions to a body of work add value and earn the right to be associated with the work.

Once more, the onus falls on us as professionals to ensure that we establish a good dialogue with artists and researchers in order to make it clear that we need to know about publications, to ask that collections are mentioned in publicity where possible and to follow up on research that is conducted with our collections. Similarly we need to nurture relationships with media professionals, so that they turn to us when reporting on issues that relate to our collections (directly or indirectly). Both researchers and representatives of the media can be surprisingly willing to engage with collections advocacy if they know it is necessary - and their engagement is key to communicating our message to high-level decision makers.

NatSCA's role

As the SSN for natural science collections, NatSCA is stepping up the advocacy side of our remit in response to a need within the sector. As natural sciences collection professionals we know what natural science collections are used for and how effectively they engage our audiences, but we also recognise that this information is often poorly communicated and we are aware that our stock is relatively low in the eyes of many decision makers.

Since NatSCA is a membership organisation run by volunteers, we have little political power and are limited in what we are able to do directly. Our strategy has been one of seeking partnership with other organisations who have links with collections and the natural sciences such as the Linnean Society, the National Forum for Biological Recording (NFBR), the Natural History Museum (NHM) and ACE, who can lend their support, knowledge and influence. Of course, every effective partnership requires an element of *quid pro quo*, and in this

case we bring the strength that lies in our membership, an extensive network of natural science professionals with links to the collections in museums all around the UK and beyond.

NatSCA provides a voice for non-national UK collections at the Linnean Society Taxonomy and Systematics Committee, which feeds back to the Natural Environment Research Council (Godfray *et al.*, 2011). With support from this committee we are in the process of planning a project to map natural science collections and their staffing levels in the UK, which will provide a basis for understanding our overarching national collection and the threats facing it. Elements of this work will be addressed by two recently appointed project staff, Dr Justine Aw and Russell Dornan, who will support the NatSCA Committee in advancing a variety of projects, thanks to £15k of SSN funding from ACE.

As mentioned earlier, NatSCA has been awarded an ACE grant of £10k to conduct research into audiences in mixed museums; the results of which we hope will contribute to our wider advocacy work and will allow NatSCA to establish better links with other SSNs in the sector. We are also involved in a session at the 2013 Museums Association conference in Liverpool, to further raise the profile of natural science collections in the wider museum sector. Finally, we have the help of some high profile natural science collections users to advocate for collections, with Professor Alice Roberts and Professor Iain Stewart very kindly agreeing to act as patrons of NatSCA.

More opportunities for advocacy will arise as we continue to develop partnerships, but we have no intention of letting these activities interfere with our delivery of practical workshops and sharing of information about advancements in collections practice and careers. In fact, with the launch of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Natural Science Collections* (JoNSC), development of our social media and redevelopment of the NatSCA website, we intend to improve the support for our members as well as improving advocacy for collections.

Since NatSCA is a network that is supported and run by members, our advocacy work should not be seen as an intervention. We all need to positively communicate the value of natural science collections to the public and decision makers if we want our voice to be heard. The future survival of natural science collections in the UK rests on all of our shoulders.

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Useful links:

NatSCA website: <http://natsca.info/>
GCG website: <http://www.geourcurator.org/>

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