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Caring for Natural History Collections

A review of a SEMS training course taught by Simon Moore, Conservator/Natural Sciences, Hampshire County Council Museums Service in December 1998.

Sarah Kenyon, Natural Sciences Curatorial Officer, Saffron Walden Museum, Museum Street, Saffron Walden, Essex

The course was attended by fifteen delegates from museums and museum services in the south-eastern region. Prior to the course the delegates were asked to submit a questionnaire, detailing the type of natural history specimens in their collections and the three most important questions that they would like to ask about caring for a natural history collection. This information helped to focus the content of the course to the needs of the delegates. We were also asked to bring along specimens from our museums' that were in need of conservation work.

The programme for the day consisted of five sessions. There was a good balance between group work, taught sessions and the chance to gain practical experience of conserving specimens.

1. Group work - identification of specimens with conservation problems.
2. Slide presentation - agents of deterioration, their effects, possible remedies.
- 3.- 4. Practical Sessions 1 and 2, held before and after lunch.
5. Question and answer session.

Problem Identification

The group assessed a range of specimens. We identified their problems, and discussed conservation solutions and any related health and safety issues. The specimens included:

1. Bird mount: covered in a white powder (arsenic salts), with oily feet and beak, insect damage, ruffled feathers, a broken neck and paint damage.
2. Bird mount: with protruding wires, split skin, bent head and neck, glue on its feathers and a broken foot.

3. Air-dried piranha: with a broken mount, damage to its teeth and tail fins, cracked paint and varnish and sunken eyes.

Agents of Deterioration

The damage to specimens resulting from poor handling, light, unsuitable relative humidity and temperature and pest attack were illustrated with slides. We discussed how to tackle the problems of dry and cracked specimens, damp, pin rot, Bynes disease, pyrite decay, pest damage, cleaning fur and feathers, degreasing bones and the rehydration of fluid preserved specimens.

Practical Sessions

The group viewed objects that had been brought in from our respective museums and discussed their problems and conservation needs. Using the two bird specimens provided by Simon Moore we had a chance to practice cleaning the birds' feathers, feet and beaks; straightening the specimens, removing protruding wires, treating dry areas with almond oil and re-attaching broken parts with reversible glue.

Question and Answer

The day ended with an 'Open Surgery' question and answer session where Simon Moore gave advice about tackling various conservation issues in our museums, based on the questions we had submitted.

I found the course to be very enjoyable and useful. There was a good mix between the different types of sessions during the day. The delegates questions about the care and conservation of natural history collections were addressed. We were also given notes to take away for future reference. The practical sessions helped us to gain experience of basic conservation techniques, which I have since had the confidence to use with the natural history collection at Saffron Walden Museum. The day could only have been improved by the provision of more specimens for the group to get their hands on!

For more information contact Simon Moore, Hampshire County Council Museums Service, 01962 846337.