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An Introduction to Molluscs: Curation, Conservation and Uses

A Meeting Report of the BCG training day held at Oxford University Museum of Natural History on 31st January, 2000

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The papers from this meeting are to be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Biology Curator*. This was a well-attended meeting covering a range of topics over the course of the day, including the curation, conservation and use of molluscs in general terms. It was aimed largely at the non-specialist molluscan curator or non natural science curator and offered basic guidelines and practical advice for those caring for these important and often neglected collections.

The meeting began with a talk from Paul Clark of the Natural History Museum, who gave a brief synopsis of the types of storage jars used for the wet preservation of molluscs and other invertebrates. This went from the first attempts using flint glass jars sealed with pigs bladder stored in 'spirit of wine' in the 17th century, to the modern alternatives such as Perspex pots in the mid 20th century. Problems with the use of these methods were outlined. Borosilicate glass jars with individual ground glass lids are deemed the most effective storage container for the preservation of wet collections at the present time.

The second speaker was another Natural History Museum specialist, David Reid. This time covering the Scientific uses of mollusc collections. Using examples and case studies, he showed how molluscs are used for study in a number of fields: morphology of anatomy, geographical studies concerning distribution and geographical variation through time, baseline studies providing basic information for environmental use; monitoring of pollution levels for example, and in DNA studies for molecular phylogenetic analysis.

Steve Cross from National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Natural History Centre, pointed out 101 uses (well, not quite) for dry mollusc collections in education. Due to the robust nature of some of the larger species, many molluscs make ideal 'hands-on' exhibits. He highlighted many of the ways in which molluscs can be used to aid study of many areas of the national curriculum and this does not just include science!

After coffee, Mary Seddon from the National Museum and Galleries of Wales, Cardiff (NMGW) gave an outline and demonstration of their documentation and public access to collections information project. NMGW use Filemaker Pro (Apple Mac) for data input. The rationale behind the fields used and their inter-relationships were explained in terms of ease of input and access to specific information at the other end. Mary went on to discuss how she had been involved in transferring parts of the working database to one which can be transferred to a world wide web based interface. This can then be browsed by the user on numerous search fields such as locality or collector, from an Internet connected computer anywhere in the world.

Julian Carter, also from NMGW, then considered the Conservation of Mollusc Collections. He covered the major problem areas in the conservation of dry stored mollusc collections, (wet preservation requiring a day of seminars all to themselves). The main causes of problems in dry (and wet) mollusca collections are: the original preparations, subsequent remedial work, neglect and poor custodial care, poor environmental conditions and incorrect storage, particularly off-gassing from wood or MDF, decay of storage plastics, and emission of plasticisers from plastic bags. The main problems associated more exclusively with dry mollusca collections are the threats from Bynes Disease, shell cracking and exfoliation, all of which were discussed in more detail, with causes, effects and treatments outlined.

Finally, before lunch, Adrian Norris from Leeds Museum talked us through his Molluscs for the Millennium project; a case study of a collection's documentation, re-storage and access project. The project aims to transfer the natural history collections from Leeds City Centre Museum into a newly renovated storage facility outside of the city centre. The Museum boasts historically and scientifically important molluscs amongst its collections. Substantial funds were secured in order to more adequately store, curate and computer document the collections for users in the new millennium.

After lunch, delegates were able to discuss specific problems and obtain additional advice from some of the morning's speakers. Demonstrations of curatorial techniques and equipment were set up by the Natural History Museum Invertebrates Curation Team, a demonstration of Educational uses of Molluscs by Steve Cross and Conservation problems by Julian Carter. Tours of the Mollusca and other collections at Oxford University Museum were offered to those interested.

