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What to Keep? The agony of choice in Entomological Acquisitions and Disposals

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The text below is a brief synopsis of the talk given at the NSCG-BCG meeting.

The Oxford University Museum of Natural History follows the standard line in acquisitions policy, that is “The Museum recognises its responsibility, in acquiring material, to ensure adequate conservation, documentation and proper use of such material and take into account limitations on collecting imposed factors as inadequate staffing, storage and conservation resources.”

Which in effect means we accept the following groups of specimens:

- Research collections of staff and students
- Collections that fill gaps in our holdings
- Nationally/Internationally important material (e.g. Type, cited or figured material)
- Oxford University expedition collections
- Important collections in terms of:
 - Voucher specimens
 - Extensive geographical coverage
 - Good taxonomical coverage e.g. British Diptera
 - Historical collections i.e. Victorian or older

Once a collection is accepted it goes through a series of procedures:

- Accessioned: both hard copy and on Database
- Frozen: to eliminate pests
- Stored in freezer room: ‘safe-storage’
- Re-housed
- Labelled given accession labels and incorporated (where a main series exists)

- Tell someone: This is done in OUMNH via the WWW searchable database of collections held or through publishing short notes in relevant journals.

The importance of labelling

Labelling of specimens is an important part of curating a collection. It helps future users track the history of a particular specimen.

- Accession labels: Always!
- Type Labels: Always!
- Determination labels: If not present add “standing under *this species* in *someone's* collection, date”
- Voucher Labels: “First County Record of *this species*”

Publicise your new acquisitions

Tell the users through short notices in relevant journals, newsletters or via the web

- HEC collections prior 1986 published in hard copy
- HEC collections online: <http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/collson.htm>

Accessions

- What we don't accept:
- Local material best deposited in the County Museum
- Collections without data
- Collections that have been over-enthusiastically ‘cherry picked’
- Research collections of limited value beyond the scope of the study involved (a tricky one)
- More British butterflies and moths

A Recent Refusal

The HEC recently refused a research collection of a single family of butterflies that have been used in molecular systematics. The material had suffered destructive sampling techniques, so that the collection consisted of wings and fluid preserved body parts.

Reasons for refusal:

- Storage: a freezer would be needed to maintain the fluid preserved material
- Material of little value to the general lepidopterist community
- Small taxonomic group
- HEC already has an extensive collection of the family involved

Assessment of Donor Collections

- Is the Material of scientific value?
- Is the material of National or Local importance?
- Is it voucher material?
- Is it duplicate of material already held?
- Is this the best place for it?
- Collection quality:
 - Coverage
 - Preservation quality
 - Associated archives
 - Identification quality
 - Data level
- If you don't take it, who will?
- Costs

Assessment of Donor Collections: The Costs

Curation and conservation of a collection takes both time and money. Factors that should be taken into consideration when assessing a collection in terms of cost are:

- Cost of re-curation and/or conservation of specimens
- Cost of incorporation and housing of the collection
- Long-term costs

Storage
Pest checking and control thereafter
Cataloguing

Getting Back the Cost?

The majority of collections come with some furniture, by selling this we

recoup some of the costs involved in re-curation and storage. However, the donor must be told of this and a photographic record of the furniture should be archived.

Cherry Picking:

The removal of specimen(s) from a collection by an individual or museum for the incorporation into their holdings, without taking the collection in its entirety.

For	Against
'Best' material kept safe	Documentation (lack thereof)
Reduction of duplication	Specimen 'traceability'
Gap filling	Donor resentment?
Reduction in costs	Ethical reasons

Recent HEC Acquisitions

D.M. Ackland British Pipunculid collection *The perfect Gift:*

- Museum standard mounted specimens
- Good coverage (70% of UK species, including several species new to the collection)
- Good identification, 300 specimens (approx.)
- Donor to accession and incorporate into collection
- Costs:
 - Staff time: none
 - Storage: none, incorporation into main collection, some expansion needed

L. D'Arcy Bornean collection: *The un-factor*

- Un-identified, Un-sorted, Un-mounted spirit stored samples (x100)
- ca. 2,000 specimens
- ca. 50% of the material is new to the collections
- Costs (to sort, mount, store material) £0.75/specimen

This price does not include the cost of determination and the postage costs to the relevant experts. However, the collection was with full data including ecological information on the habitats and has since been used by higher degree students for projects.

Disposals

First and foremost you must follow the Disposal Policy of your institute. Choosing what to dispose of can be difficult:

- Material without data
- Damaged specimens beyond repair
- Historical 'junk'
- Student Projects
- Un-reliable data

What about provenance?

In the case of un-labelled material it is often possible to associate a collector and so on with just the method of mounting or even the type of pin used. Inscribed numbers on specimen mounts or labels may refer to notebooks or checklist and old desiderata lists. If in doubt seek advice, always err on the side of caution...

Entomological donations tend to be accessioned in 'lots', due to the quantity of specimens involved. Therefore, in most cases individual specimens do not have an individual accession number. This makes small disposals within a single collection relatively easy. Unfortunately this rarely gets documented, and thus data is lost. Always document in as far as possible the material that is to be disposed of and form an archive of:

- Photograph of material (now with digital, even cheaper)
- Labels (gives examples of handwriting)
- Examples of mounting techniques
- Example of pins used

What to do now.....

Once you have exhausted all of the above, the next stage is to 'dispose' of the material. In such cases it often possible to find another 'user' of unwanted material. Alternative uses:

- Teaching
- Artists
- Displays
- Hands-on material
- Offer to someone else

Finally... The skip: after exhausting all other possibilities