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Should local authority museums be collecting natural history?

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Natural history collections in local authority museums, as for all collections in all institutions, must be able to justify their existence if they are to survive. Collecting itself is essential to the development of a collection and must be justified confidently, precisely and vigorously in order to continue. 'Collections and collecting are after all the very essence of museum practice.'¹

Justifications for keeping natural history collections.

A major reason to collect natural history is to augment valuable collections. However, the value of natural history is a huge topic and much time and writing space has been dedicated to it. This article concentrates on the reasons for and against collecting. For more in depth analysis of the justifications for keeping natural history see: Pettit, C., 'Putting 'Bloody Mice' to Good Use', *Museums Journal*, (August 1991), 25-7; Nudds, J. R. and Pettit, C. W., eds., *The value and valuation of Natural Science Collections* (London: The Geographical Society, 1997).

Current Collecting Trends

In the summer of 2000, most Local authority museums were increasing their natural history collections (Table 1).

Whether they should be or not, local authority museums are currently collecting natural history. Of the two museums not expanding their collection in this study, Leeds Museum is currently 'static collecting,' due to space and money problems and the Yorkshire Museum's natural history department has also been forbidden to collect before its 'backlog' has been cleared. Nevertheless, they were still able to say through what means they normally collect (displaying a strong presumption to collect) suggesting that the termination of collecting is a 'pause' rather than a permanent arrangement. Table 2 shows the methods of collecting in the eight museums used in this study.

The large standard deviation is due to the small sample size as well as the variability of the data. This variation in collecting habits is a reflection of the resources available to each museum as well as the personal preferences of the curators involved.

Collecting Policies

Although the museums in this survey are collecting in a variety of different ways and at a variety of different rates their collecting policies all contain similar points e.g. geography and legality. A few discuss deeper aspects of collecting, for example the Hancock Museum's collecting policy states that 'it is the collection and its association with a particular place, time and person that is important. It is for this reason that the data that

Institution	Number of accessions per year
Bolton Museum, Art Gallery and Aquarium	~20
Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery	1 – 10
Hancock Museum (Newcastle)	<6
Hull Museums and Art Galleries	~30
Leeds Museum Resource Centre	0
Leicester City Museum Service	~200
Norwich Museum Service	~18
The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (Stoke)	~1000
Sheffield City Museum	~150
Wollerton Hall (Nottingham)	~100
Yorkshire Museum	0

Table 1: The speed at which certain museums are adding to their collections every year.

Institution	Donation	Field Collection	Purchase
Bolton Museum	Z 98% B 20%	Z 0% B 78%	Z 2% B 2%
Bristol City Museum	99%	1%	0%
Hancock Museum (Newcastle)	100%	0%	0%
Hull Museums and Art Galleries	50%	50%	0%
Leeds Museum Resource Centre	90%	5%	5%
Leicester City Museum Service	50%	45%	5%
Norwich Museum Service	No data	No data	No data
The Potteries Museum (Stoke)	90%	8%	2%
Sheffield City Museum	5%	95%	0%
Wollerton Hall (Nottingham)	10%	89%	1%
Yorkshire Museum	90%	5%	5%
Mean	63.82%	34.18%	2%
Standard Deviation	37.98	38.49	2.10
95% Confidence Limit	38.31 < μ < 89.33	8.31 < μ < 60.05	0.60 < μ < 3.40

Z = zoological collection, B = botanical collection

Table 2: The methods by which certain museums collect.

accompanies collections is vital.² and Bristol City Museum's states that 'all collecting will be pursued with restraint and due regard to safeguarding individual species, population and habitats.'³

Policies did not often consider why the museum collects, they only observed that it does. For justification of collecting the collectors themselves, the curators, are answerable.

Environmental recording

Environmental recording has become a major function of local authority museums, indeed they helped to create the environmental recording movement.⁵ For physical data on the state of species at present, researchers in the future will have to rely almost solely on the efforts of museums and Biological Records Centres.

In having up to date records, building developments and council planning departments, can assess whether or not the habitat they are about to develop is of biological significance. Planners are 'required by law to take wildlife into account when assessing planning applications'⁶ and councils can turn down a development proposal if the biology of the location is significant and compromised.⁷

Voucher Specimens

'Without voucher specimens, ... costly, time consuming research ... may be unsalvageable.'⁸ For example, 'two large and

expensive surveys, one for a river valley authority in America and one for an oil company, failed to preserve voucher material in a permanent collection. Both surveys were carried out by recent graduates with little taxonomic experience, and their findings have since been successfully challenged.'⁹ If museums did not collect, then voucher material may not be so well cared for or even not preserved at all.

Information for the future

In 1910, Joseph Grinnell, the director of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley, U.S.A., wrote, 'I wish to emphasize what I believe will ultimately prove to be the greatest value of our museum. - And this is that the student of the future will have access to the original record of faunal conditions in California and the west wherever we work now.'¹⁰ Grinnell was laying down what was to become one of the most fundamental reasons for collecting: future research.

There are many examples of studies for which it seems very unlikely that the original collector could have foreseen their collection's future use. For example, the study by Radcliffe in 1967 of the effects of the chlorinated hydrocarbons (among them the infamous DDT) on bird eggshell thickness led to the pesticide being banned.¹¹

Natural history collections, because of the information they contain, are treasure-troves for present and future research. 'Bewildering as the masses of accumulated items may be,

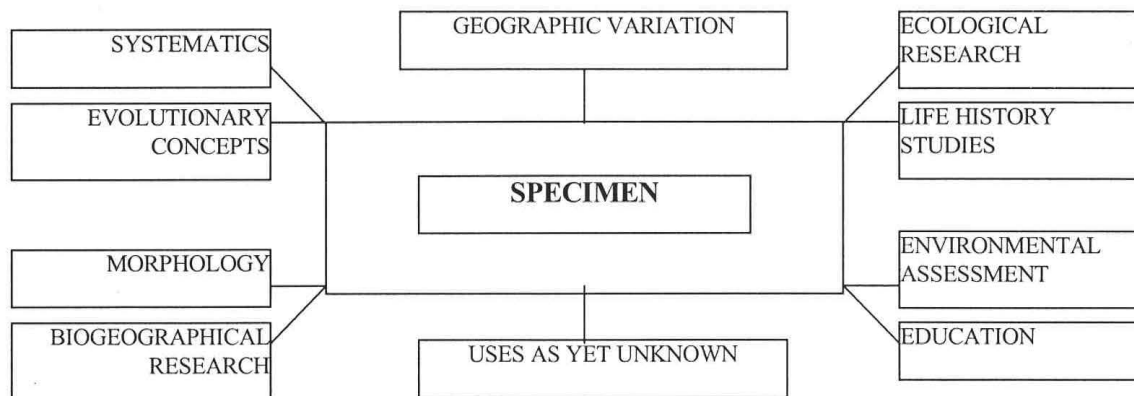


Figure 3: The uses of a collected specimen (after Cambray).⁴

they remain one of the most precious resources of mankind.¹²

Because we cannot see the future and because it is impossible to collect everything, 'sensible' collecting is the best that can be done currently. You have to assume that new techniques will become available to use on the specimens you are collecting now.¹³

However, several of the curators interviewed for this study talked about how little research they carried out on their collection.¹⁴ How can museums guarantee that research will happen in the future if it is not happening now? To help justify collecting then more research may have to take place now.

Although collections are being used, only a small number of people are using them.¹⁵ Local authority museums need to advertise the huge resource they have and encourage the use of collections not only for reference but also for exploration by the public. Museums should be promoting their resources and encouraging research if they want to make full use of what they have.¹⁶ Research is a large part of the function of museums in other countries, why not in the UK? Some say that without research, collections will not survive.^{17 18}

**'A static museum is a dead museum.'¹⁹
What happens if a museum stops collecting?**

Some believe that without collecting museums 'will lose their memory function; they will cease to be living institutions but rather fossilised monuments to a vanished age.'²⁰ If they are perceived as out of date or not developing with time, they are easier to get rid of. Stopping collecting could be perceived as stopping being relevant, 'if you stopped being relevant to the present day then there [would] be a greater chance that [natural history] would just become obsolete.'²¹

However, collections remain collections if they are being added to, or not. If anything, they might improve because more time would be spent on their maintenance.

Collecting can 'lead to a loss of normal reason.'²² The problems for Local authority museums of collecting natural history.

Resources

Caring for specimens is, usually, more costly than collecting them.²³ However, the gathering and preparation of specimens requires a lot of work, time, space and finance.²⁴ If museums cannot afford these then should they be collecting at all?

When asked the question 'What problems do you have with an expanding collection?' nearly all the curators interviewed said 'space' immediately.²⁵ Funding, staffing and time were also given as major problems.

Funding for local authority museums is notoriously scarce and changeable and even careful allocation of resources using detailed long term plans and audits cannot help much if there is only 'one storeroom and twenty quid.'²⁶

Local authority museums are struggling to maintain their collections at a satisfactory level, adding to them can just make the problem worse. One curator said that, 'unless you can store [collections] and look after them properly then you don't have them.'²⁷ 'We have touched the ceiling of growth both physically and financially.'²⁸

Backlog

Can museums really justify adding to the 'conservation mountain' when resources are so short anyway?²⁹

The implications of uncleared backlog can be far reaching. One of the criteria for registration is proof of a policy for keeping documentation in support of the collection. 'The principles are that a museum should know at any time exactly for what items it is legally responsible, and where each item is located.'³⁰ More fundamental than losing registration status is the sharp decrease in access to the collection, and its information, if it is not properly documented.

However, most museums are attempting to reduce the size of their 'to do' list, Stuart Ogilvy, at the Yorkshire Museum, said that ceasing collecting to clear backlog 'may be slightly irksome but there are very good reasons for it.'

'Natural history in provincial museums means stuffed birds.'³¹ Public Perception

Because Local authority museums are ultimately funded from the public purse, what the public thinks and feels about museums collecting biological material, especially when it is killed specifically for the purpose, must feature when considering natural history collecting. If the local community object to any practices of the museum, they are within their rights, as contributors to it, to question its function.

Investigating commissioners in Sweden found that the public 'know neither how or why museums collect, and consequently question the very need.'³² Some of the public regard curators as the 'last bastion of the "shoot first, ask questions later" fraternity' even though curators see themselves as being at the forefront of conservation education.³³

One curator remarked: 'If we don't increase access and show people what we've got, we keep it hidden, we're not going to survive.'³⁴

Degradation and relevance of material.

'Experience suggests ... that only 10% of collections can be preserved (well).'³⁵ What then is the point of collecting material for future research if it is unlikely to be permanently preserved?

Dunn noted that objects may 'alter their status within a collection, and may even slip outside a museum's interest.'³⁶ Can collecting be justified if the specimen may eventually 'slip outside a museum's interest'?

Is collecting out of date and fuelled only by tradition?

Sola believes that 'the philosophy [of modern curators] is one of acquire now think later' and also supposes that the 'pressure for quantitative perfection' is still too strong for collecting to cease or slow down.³⁷ This implies that museums are still collecting for collecting's sake.

If it is truly the case that museums are continuing to collect because they always have done, then they will not be able to endure. However, none of the curators interviewed were at a loss to give the reasons why they collected and 'because we always have' was

not one of them.

Population numbers and environmentalism

Some believe that natural habitats all over the world have been 'disturbed and destroyed' by over zealous collecting.³⁸ Individual species definitely have:

'On 4th June 1844, three fishermen made a trip to the island of Eldey, off Iceland, hired by a bird collector, Carl Siemson, to get specimens of [the Great Auk]. One fisherman had to return empty-handed, for his colleagues had just destroyed the last two Great Auks in existence. Siemson had these stuffed and later sold them to a museum.'³⁹

Fortunately, these stories are historic rather than modern (we hope) but the issue of environmentalism is perhaps the hardest objection a museum collector must overcome. The ethical considerations do not necessarily produce a straightforward answer either for or against. Indiscriminate, haphazard collecting is unjustifiable; it has occurred too regularly in the past and accounts for too large a portion of current natural history collections.⁴⁰ 'How often do these collections play a vital role in the function of the museum today?'⁴¹ We cannot prove conclusively that killing organisms for museum collections will help save the remaining population and/or habitat, but through research and education there is a good chance that it will.

Conclusion

Museums need to continue to educate both the public and their funding bodies about natural history and collecting to turn around the perception that collecting is 'misguided and ill thought out.'⁴² Curators can argue for resources more effectively if a potential backer is more aware of the issues. It is a museum's 'societal responsibility' to put this information out there.⁴³

Behaving responsibly towards collecting is an obvious, but essential factor, in justifying it. In order to assure the 'maximum utility of each animal' and 'minimise the need for duplicate collecting,' appropriate preparation for preservation of material is required.⁴⁴ A museum cannot justify collecting something that is unlikely to survive or be useful; it nullifies all the original reasons for keeping it.

Strategic, sensible planning for the future will greatly aid the chance of a museum's place in it.

A method of collecting that was often advocated by curators, when being interviewed for this dissertation, was the concept of specialisation. Curators' own expertise could be used to develop certain areas of a collection. This way, certain niches in the collection would be of an excellent standard, rather than the whole collection being improved only gradually. One curator commented that perhaps curators should shift jobs every few years in order to develop other collections and allow the collections they leave behind to be developed by a curator with different interests.

Although collecting for recognised research projects (rather than collecting everything in the hope of producing something useful for the future) has many advocates, it remains a restrictive method leading to the exclusion of large amounts of potentially crucial material. Although this may be positive for a museum faced with dwindling resources, it could result in larger problems in the future.

Ethical considerations are far reaching and circumstances are different for each individual object and for each individual collection. There do not seem to be many clean cut definitive arguments for or against collecting that cover every eventuality. Collecting natural history is so beneficial in many areas but responsible collecting and solid justifications for that collecting are the only way for it to proceed.

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This article is a condensed version of a dissertation written in 2000 for the degree of MSc Museums Studies at the University of Leicester. If you would like a full copy of the dissertation please contact the Editor.

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