

London Meeting
The Natural History Museum, London
3.10.2006

Present:

NHM

Vicki Papworth
Rob Huxley
Claire Valentine
Howard Mendel
Paul Brown
Amelia MacLellan
Miranda Lowe
Jon Ablett
Douglas Russell
Sarah Long
Clive Jones

Horniman

Sherry Doyal
Jo Hatton

Grant Museum of Zoology

Jack Ashby

Kew Gardens

Elizabeth Woodgyer
D. Zappi

South London Botanical Society

Petra Broddle

Greenspace information for Greater London

Mandy Rudd

Apologies for absence:

Gill Stevens
Andrea Hallaway
Mel Smith
Oliver Crimmen

The meeting started with a brief history of the group, for those that weren't members, and a sum-up of our objectives for the SSN.

The first question that was raised was to what extent our objectives were attached to hubs, or to what extent they were more strategic in nature. MLA looks like it is tailoring the network to give funding to institutions and not to groups or hubs, which is why the NatSCA bid is based in Leicester. As NatSCA we want to be able to disburse funds and employ people, and we should perhaps make this clear(er) to the MLA. There was a strong feeling that we should put forward a very practical bid; we must be sure of what we want to do and to think how we could best achieve it without overstretching ourselves.

We spoke about other groups and how we might best get them involved. These included institutions such as Zoos, museums, with living collections, parks and gardens and the National Trust. The SSN could be seen as facilitating links between these groups, perhaps also considering them as potential venues for touring exhibitions. It was strongly felt by some members of the group that the best use of any initial money would be to employ someone to pull all this work together, to act as a hub for the SSN and who would contact all potential stakeholders.

There was some worry that some regional groups would be more proactive than others, and the possibility of assimilating these smaller groups into larger ones where there was more motivation was suggested. They would not need to lose a regional identity, as the SSN would act as a hub/coordinator for all involved, not just for all regions involved. Sustainability was seen as a potential problem – as it is often down to personalities – and there was concern about resources being too thinly spread. However, the opposite tendency, to encourage and enthuse less dominant groups, might well occur.

The idea of a register of skills was one that everyone agreed would be a practical place for the SSN to start. This was felt to be the kind of work that NatSCA should be doing anyway, and that perhaps NatSCA should fund this, even if more money were not available from the MLA. If MLA funding were available, then it could be used for those areas that it was specific to, and NatSCA could fund other areas (such as the website) that the MLA would not fund. This way the project would have a double support and more chance of success.

The idea of developing collections by gaining knowledge of the regional collections, as they currently exist, was felt to be important, and of publicising more fully those which had high priority issues (e.g. the freezing or loss of natural science posts).

Discussions were held about the potential sophistication of any website, and what was needed. The MLA will not fund the setting up of a website to act as the focus for any SSN, as it has plans for a comprehensive website in the future. We spoke about the difficulty or otherwise of maintaining a website, particularly in reference to unforeseen factors such as maternity leave and people leaving jobs.

- The MLA likes clear outcomes, so we should be practical about what we can achieve, and set ourselves realistic goals.
- How can we best work with other organisations, e.g. Wildlife Trusts?
- The next NatSCA committee meeting should look at all the regional meetings that have taken place and create lists of common ground and further suggestions.

It was generally felt that this could be a great opportunity for reciprocal arrangements and benefits to be shared to all of these institutions forming this network. Any money from the MLA should be seen as seedcorn money for the scheme, which was very much NatSCA's provenance, and not as paying for it outright.

The following topics were discussed in some detail, leading to the list of potential outcomes for the bid:

Network:

The SSN could act as a hub for the creation of a skills and/or partnership network that could be used for training, identifying resource gaps and potential collaborations. We would want to work on both a local and a national level – the coordinator would pull together the register, but also create local contacts.

It would obviously be a great way to share expertise (e.g. transport of dangerous goods, conservation expertise of the SW hub).

Training:

It was felt that training, either provided locally as one-off courses, or placement schemes would be a positive direction for the SSN. Skills gaps need to be assessed and relevant training provided. There was discussion about the possibility of tying training in with the AMA portfolio, or perhaps with NVQs, which would be a tangible benefit for employees and employers. (NVQ level 5 is AMA associated already, NVQ level 4 is BA / BSc level).

Placements should have a physical outcome such as an audience benefit (e.g. exhibitions, publications) or should raise the profile of natural sciences / institutions / SSN (e.g. lectures, press days). It was felt that placements might not duplicate effort as much as repeat courses might.

A national student day was suggested; where all placements get together and give a presentation on the work that they have carried out. It would be good for networking and could lead to collaborations across disciplines (not just collections-based, but also exhibitions, IPM, audiences, learning).

The question was raised about how training could be assessed or maintained to an equivalent standard across the regions

Audiences:

Collaborative audience work outside the local region would be a great opportunity created by the SSN. There could be the potential for temporary and shared natural history exhibitions. At present there is no real knowledge of the kind of exhibition spaces owned by regional museums, so it would be useful to partner up institutions that had similar resources. They could also work together in access programmes. How many national / regional / local museums could house a temporary exhibition at all?

Recording:

The NFBR¹ feel that record centres should be linked to local collection centres, and there was discussion about other groups that agreed with this attitude (such as Wildlife Trusts).

¹ National Federation for Biological Recording

There are skills gaps in these sorts of institutions and training would be useful. It would fill the gaps for ecologists, surveyors, recorders etc and would also inspire and engage all kinds of people to start on this type of activity. Local training was seen as a useful tool.

Potential Outcomes:

1. SSN to act as a hub for regions

Employ a member of staff (short contract? part-time?) to pull this information together and act as a hub for all the regions. They could be responsible for the skills audit?

- Formalising relationships
- Aiding reciprocal arrangements
- Considering sustainability of the network

2. Find out the regional make-up for the SSN

- Document the local institutions which have natural science collections, not only museums, but private collections, historic houses, universities etc

3. Collections Management information and resource sharing

- Risk Management / Disaster Planning
- Transport of dangerous goods

4. Use the network to inform others when experts are around and encourage them to give papers / presentations in the local area.

5. Exhibition Resources

Find out what resources are available in terms of collections and expertise on a local / regional level.

6. Skills audit / Register of skills

7. Training needs audit / Skills Gap

8. Training Programme

Tie in with AMA / NVQ?

- Placements / apprenticeships
- Short courses
- Work in partnership to create longer courses (e.g. ns conservation MA)
- Meetings
- Roadshow
- Publications

9. Assessment of collections, regionally or nationally

- Survey membership and find out how useful a national database of collections information is e.g. Fenscore are to people and how often they are consulted
- Survey membership to find out what databases of collections information do people have available now.