

Scottish Meeting
Perth Museum & Art Gallery
24th October 2006

Present:

National Museums Scotland
Andrew Kitchener
Graham Rotheray
Suzanne Miller

Dundee Museums
Dave Lampard
Ruth Neave

St Andrews University Geology Dept.
Stuart Allison

Glasgow Museums
Duncan Ferguson
Helen Clifton
Jeanne Robinson
Keith Watson
Laurence Simmen
Mike Rutherford
Richard Sutcliffe

Perth Museum
Mark Simmons

Aberdeen University Historic Collections
Alan Knox

St Andrews University Bell Pettigrew Museum
Iain Matthews
Martin Milner

Hunterian Museum
Neil Clark
John Faithfull
Maggie Reilly

Dundee University Collections
Matthew Jarron

Angus Museums
Willie Milne

Apologies:

Alastair Gunning
Cathy Caudwell
Pat Preston
Jonathan Watt

Glasgow Museums
Dundee University Biology
Edinburgh University Biology
Inverness Museum

Background to the meeting:

The meeting was well attended and this was the first time that Natural Sciences curators in Scotland have met for about 10 years. There have been no regular meeting since the Collections Research Project in the 1980s.

Invitations were sent to natural science collections staff at local authority museums, university collections and museums, and the National Museums Scotland. All current NatSCA members in Scotland were invited.

Museums that currently lack a specialist curator were not invited on this occasion. There are a number of natural science collections in museums in Scotland where there is no specialist. Some have had a specialist in the past e.g. Paisley Museum, Scottish Borders Museums.

All invitations were to natural scientists engaged in managing a collection. No invitations were sent out to the wider non-museum natural science community e.g. local natural history societies, biodiversity partnerships, conservation organisations, biological record centres, etc.

Meeting Notes:

The meeting began with introductions and news of recent & future projects and initiatives. A note was not taken of this part of the meeting but it was encouraging to hear about new developments taking place or proposed for Kelvingrove Glasgow, Royal Scottish Museum, McManus Galleries Dundee, Hunterian Museum University of Glasgow and others.

- Background to SSN for Natural Sciences in Scotland

A brief summary was given of the Renaissance programme in England and the MLA SSN UK programme.

In Scotland there are other relevant initiatives. The Scottish Executive is giving up to £3 million through the Regional Development Challenge Fund. This is to support museums to develop museum capacity at a regional level, in areas such as learning, access, tourism and workforce development. A number of museums represented at the meeting were involved in these partnerships but none of the funding has been allocated to a specifically natural sciences project.

A new Significance Scheme has just been launched. Up to £1 million will be available over the next two years. The scheme will recognise collections of national significance held by Scotland's non-national museums and galleries.

The National Museums Scotland has a National Partnership initiative. Knowledge sharing workshops have been set up along with "Advice for Museums" webpages. Natural Sciences are not expected to be covered in the new training workshops in the short term because of pressing commitments towards the proposed new developments for the Royal Scottish Museum.

A number of points were discussed that are set out in the NatSCA paper "Developing a Subject Specialist Network for the Natural Sciences". The discussion about each is summarised below.

- Do we need a SSN?

One person said no, this wasn't a priority and it wouldn't be an effective use of time & effort. Others welcomed the opportunity for natural science curators to meet and network. It was very rare that we had come together so this meant that we didn't have a voice to lobby the Scottish Executive and others. There was a danger that if we didn't support the proposed network that Scotland would be left behind by developments in England. There was some discussion about what might be done by the SSN that couldn't be done by NatSCA. The regional SSNs might work most effectively if they were designed to meet the need of each region rather than each having to undertake the same role and function. For Scotland it was felt that there was an advocacy role for such a group. The main benefit was considered to be a Scottish voice for natural science collections to highlight their importance to the Scottish Executive. The SSN whilst primarily an English funded scheme was still applicable to Scotland and the money could be spent here. Finding time to progress a SSN was a concern. It was agreed to re-visit this question at the end of the meeting.

- Do you agree with the vision and aims for the SSN as set out in the NatSCA paper?
This wasn't discussed in any depth but broadly they seem acceptable.

- What should be the main priority areas for a SSN?
Comments were made on each item listed as a priority in the NatSCA paper.

- National Standards for collections care, data standards and data capture.
It was felt these largely existed already e.g Collections Care Standards, SPECTRUM etc. This should be a low priority.

Developing new & entry level staff:

This was a good idea but would depend on funding becoming available. Existing staff also needed development and a programme of secondments could support this.

Identification Skills:

It wasn't clear whether this point was referring to museums staff acquiring identification skills or whether it was about museum staff & collections being used to pass on these skills to others. Knowing who to contact for identification is equally important and a mechanism for finding this out was needed whether this was a database, email network or informal contact through a network. Advocating the need for identification skills might be a role for the SSN. The Field Studies Council & others already have a role in identification courses. Museum collections are underused for field studies courses.

Improved sharing of curatorial expertise:

This is a potential benefit of a SSN. One mechanism for this is through training courses. Most existing courses were in the south of England. It would be good if some training opportunities could be set up in Scotland. The Scottish Museums Council used to provide some natural science courses but hasn't for a number of years. Could they be approached to run some? Would it be possible for more NatSCA and GCG events to take place in Scotland? It was felt that having a louder Scottish voice for the natural sciences is important. The natural sciences were missing out on new developments & initiatives in the UK and Scottish museums sector.

Large scale joint projects:

Discussion focussed on collections access initiatives.

There are already some collection access initiatives underway e.g Herbaria United. In Scotland the SMC are setting up a "Collections Level Description" initiative. The website will initially usually data prepared for the "National Audit of Scottish Museum Collections" and other existing sources. Would it be possible to incorporate the Scottish FENSCORE data? Given that there a number of initiatives underway this would not be an important role for a SSN.

Peer Review of Performance:

Not important for an SSN.

Quality Circles:

The creation of networking opportunities is the key point.

Ability to work nationally:

Not clear what is being suggested.

Touring exhibitions:

It was felt that major resources and commitment would be needed to set up touring exhibitions. There are very few touring or even temporary natural science exhibitions. There might be scope to tour 2D exhibitions or share exhibition panels between venues. Each venue could provide its own objects & specimens. Exhibitions could be very small (1 case & 1 panel). But different museum venues have different size requirements and exhibition planning timescales. HLF will pay for the costs of touring new acquired specimens where HLF funded the acquisition as long as there is real commitment to tour it. Exhibition sharing or touring can be best arranged between institutions or through small partnership arrangements. It is not an important role for a future SSN.

Purchase and share significant collections objects.:

Arrangements could be brokered between museums where the need arises. Other than for certain geological specimens there are few natural sciences specimens available for purchase. There is not a role for a SSN.

Updating FENSCORE:

Worthwhile but see comments above under large scale joint projects. A middle priority.

Three additional priorities were suggested.

Skills Audit:

This should not be a database but a networking solution.

Collections cared for by non-specialist staff:

Natural sciences collections are large and therefore difficult to curate and document. There are many such collections where no specialist is employed to curate them. A SSN would have a role in raising awareness about this issue and would need to lobby in order to improve natural sciences collection provision.

There is a lot of current thinking about the future of collections (e.g Museums Association Collections for the Future, Scottish Museums Council Collections Development Strategy) but concern was raised that the special needs of natural science collections and concerns of natural science collections staff have not been addressed in these documents. Again there is no organisation or forum in Scotland to give a voice to natural science collections to feed into these initiatives.

Attracting new audiences to the natural sciences:

Promote the inspiration & educational role of natural sciences collections.

- How could a SSN be organised & function?

The membership of the SSN should be made up of the people who are directly involved with natural sciences collections.

Given the different collections funding strands that operate in Scotland e.g Scottish Executive, Scottish Museums Council, the SSN might work most effectively in Scotland if it was set up as a Scottish SSN. There is already an example of a Scottish SSN being set up. The Scottish Technology & Industry Collections SSN is initially being supported and in-part funded by the NMS National Partnerships programme. This new group aims to become self-financed in the future. A Scottish SSN would be able to directly advocate the case for natural science collections to the Scottish Executive & other Scottish bodies.

- How could a SSN be funded?

It was agreed that institutional sign up was important in order to let people fully participate.

- Do we need a SSN? (revisited)

The meeting did not express a strong desire to see the setting up of a UK SSN for Natural Sciences. It would however be supportive and participate in a UK network if one were established.

It was felt that the key role for a SSN was advocacy. In particular this was not happening in Scotland and the creation of a Scottish SSN with advocacy and lobby as its main remit was seen as desirable.

The other roles that a SSN could undertake would be to provide

- Networking opportunities, through direct contact or effective electronic means
- Improving knowledge and expertise sharing

- Development for staff including new & entry level staff.
- Highlighting the plight of “orphan collections” and taking action to resolve this issue.

Next Moves:

The note of this meeting has been passed to NatSCA . Notes of all the UK regional meetings are on the NatSCA website (www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/natSCA/aboutus/ssn/regional).

We will keep you informed of any decision that NatSCA makes and if appropriate arrange a future meeting in Scotland.

A copy of this note has also been forwarded to Gillian Findlay, Collections Development Manager at the Scottish Museums Council.

The email contact list for natural sciences curators, conservators and collection managers in Scotland will be maintained. If anyone has suggestions for further contacts please pass them to Mark Simmons at Perth Museum.