

**South East England Meeting**  
**Hampshire County Council Museums & Archives Service (HCCMAS)**  
**11<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

**Present:**

Christine Taylor, HCCMS (Chair)  
Chris Palmer, HCCMAS  
Simon Moore, HCCMAS  
Margaret Munroe, HCCMAS  
Ruth Borthwick, HCCMAS  
Emma Hart, HCCMAS  
Gerald Legg, Brighton  
Angela Houghton, Reading.

**Apologies:**

Hayley Stephens, Maidstone  
David Evans, Portsmouth.

**Organising the meeting**

This was actually a challenge in itself as it was difficult trying to locate museums in the SE, apart from the most obvious ones. After identifying as many museums in the SE as possible, WebPages were checked to try and establish whether they had a natural science collection. This led to a couple of contacts; one was an Education Officer who also happened to look after Natural Science collections and the other a Commercial and Development Manager of a museum where the Natural Science post hadn't been filled following the departure of the previous incumbent.

Generally the response to the NatSCA SE Region meeting was poor and, disappointingly, there was no reply to one of the lead partners despite emailing individuals and their departments on several occasions.

Possibly one of the reasons for this is that as the number of Natural Science staff has dwindled the potential for networking with others working in local museums has become diminished, the Nationals being the more obvious choice for advice on collections. It may be that the lead museum that didn't respond perceives their role at a more international rather than a local level.

As Natural Sciences covers such a diverse area of subjects the more obvious local links are with people working in the field rather than other Natural Scientists working in museums.

**Issues associated with Natural Science Collections**

- Natural Science Collections suffer in terms of profile and are often seen as curiosities and props. The drivers seem to be education, temporary exhibitions and display. There is a need to emphasize the other more important roles of Natural Science Collections – as a reference resource providing evidence of the natural past and as voucher specimens, supporting literature and other records. The collections therefore need advocacy and until this is resolved there is nothing to hang the collections on.

- There is a need to be involved with special exhibition programs in a targeted way. This could be possibly be achieved by developing a network of touring small displays with a strong Natural Science theme (e.g. the importance of Natural Science Collections or looking at current affairs and issues) which can be added to by each host museum.
- It is felt that National Museums don't value Natural Science collections outside of their museum.
- The few Natural Scientists working in smaller museums now have other responsibilities and roles aside from their collections.
- Natural Scientists are under pressure from institutions with Natural Science collections but no curatorial staff. These pressures include offering advice on looking after and caring for their collection, surveying and assessing the collections or even taking on the collections.
- Natural Science staff are not being readily replaced. There is now an ageing core of natural science staff with limited prospects of replacement on retirement.
- The situation appears even worse for Natural Science conservators – there are even less of these and opportunities for training are very limited.
- There is the perception with Natural Science collections that if there are staff in place, the collection is adequately covered. Most people are trained in one area of the sciences such as botany, geology, entomology, zoology, but not other areas. Even within any one of these areas it is impossible to be an expert owing to the vast number of species. Museum Natural Scientists are somehow expected to be experts in every field. It is only in the National Museums that this is recognised and even then the collections are inadequately staffed.
- It was felt that it was important to develop links with universities, further education establishments and the Natural History Museum to explore how museums could help deliver formal training. HCCMAS has developed close links with HBIC (Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre) and is a major partner. This has led to joint bid with HBIC where resources for caring for and management of collections have been identified, as well as developing and delivering training for biologists working in the field.

### **How Natural Scientists might benefit from funding:**

Without being clear about how money was available it was difficult to identify specific projects.

- Provision of a Regional Peripatetic Natural Science Team. This team could advise on different aspects of collections. They could also identify issues or problems with collections and help with funding for collections at risk or in need of work.
- Provision of a Regional (or National) skills list. Most people have one or more specialist areas that might not appear from their job description. This could

include subject expertise, documentation, storage and housing of collections etc and could be delivered by circulating a spreadsheet for completion.

- Development of links with museums on WebPages. This could include major collections, small collections with a 'Sense of Place' and collections care.
- Revisit the SECRU project, especially those collections in public ownership to determine their current condition.
- Development of a national network to raise the profile of Natural Science Collections within museums and also with the general public.
- Provide training in basic curatorial techniques and to establish means for training of Natural Science conservators.

### **Events / Exhibitions / Projects in SE Region**

- Link in with National profiles and initiatives. Hampshire is linking in with Science week. Event at SEARCH, Gosport (Pole to Pole) and smaller events at community museums.
- Create a foyer type exhibition, explaining the use and importance of Natural Science collections, which could be circulated to other museums in the area. Other objects could be added to from each museum's collections.
- Trial a small exhibition on colour with the view to making a cross-disciplinary touring exhibition.

### **Any Other Business**

The Human Tissues Act has had financial implications for museums holding remains and microscope slides with human tissue. This is £1500 initially to register and then £500 per year for less than 20 items, £5000 per year for more than 20 items.