

As Chair of the GCG I would like to let you all know of recent developments with the (erstwhile) Subject Specialist Network for Natural Sciences.

I attended a meeting of representatives of the Subject Specialist Networks with MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives council) where we were informed about their recent restructuring which has meant very little has happened over SSNs on the MLA side of operations. There are now many SSNs both old established groups and small new ones now in existence and in operation. NOTE: Though supported by the English Museums, Libraries & Archives council (MLA), the subject specialist network scheme is open to all UK and non-UK museums and organisations.

Paul Brown, now chair of Natural Sciences Collections Association or NatSCA (previously Biological Curators' Group & Natural Sciences Conservation Group), was also present and we had some very useful discussions as to what we might do together. We are also keen to develop good & proper working relations with the other groups concerned with natural science collections and conservation.

MLA asked the representatives what we really wanted from them: comments from myself and Paul included: not so much "help & training" from them but money for paying a part-time staff member to organise and administrate our training, seminars, events, bursaries, peripatetic curator / conservator help etc etc. We hope that the 'Natural Sciences SSN' will not be dictated to by the MLA as respective groups already exist and operate extremely well as a network.

The MLA are offering support and an information gateway via The Collections Trust Collections Link website:

http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/find_a_network/subject_specialists

We plan to link our website, along with NatSCA, to theirs as the "www.naturalscience.specialistnetwork.org.uk", thus maintaining a presence alongside other MLA-supported SSNs. An example exists at:

<http://www.portraits.specialistnetwork.org.uk/>.

The next step will be to establish a SSN steering group comprised, where possible, of the following (practicing natural science) members: single reps from NatSCA, GCG, the 9 Regional Hubs in England, Wales, Scotland, NI, University Museums & the National museums (NHM, NML, NMW, NMS). Maybe also with the Guild of taxidermists, Care of Collections Forum, Institute of Conservation, ICOM Natural History Collections Working Group etc.

The first suggested activity for the NS-SSN (based on the output from the regional meetings with natural science museum staff) is to create a fund to support peripatetic work. It is hoped that MLA will continue to support such work with funding, depending on how much money can be made available.

Peripatetic work divides comfortably into 3 categories:

Curator: Assistance with collections management/care / identification / understanding collection held

Conservator Assistance with collections care/conservation (remedial & preventive) / risks to collection/ risks to staff in contact with collection

Other "expert" (e.g. External consultant) Assistance with

identification/understanding significance of smaller collection elements

Any individual project must be able to demonstrate direct value to the collections/host institution regardless of value to the person carrying out the work. (Pure collections mapping exercises will not be funded.)

Following the creation of a steering group, it is expected that the fund will be available for applications and a formal application procedure will be developed and promoted. The steering group will judge such applications on their own merits.

For more details relating to the background of the NS-SSN please visit our website at <http://www.geocurator.org> and NatSCA's at http://www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/natSCA

I will try to keep you up-to-date with any future developments.

Helen Fothergill, Chair of the Geological Curators' Group

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Written in collaboration with Paul Brown, Chair NatSCA