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Author(s): Steele, J.

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Issues for natural sciences collections in the West Midlands

While continuing to work on the partnership with the University of Birmingham, Renaissance in the Regions partnership brought a strategic view to museum issues for the West Midlands, and in my case looking at regional strategies for collections. With this in mind the Natural Sciences Collection Group for the West Midlands was inaugurated in February 2003. The group brings together all those responsible for caring for and interpreting natural science collections in the region – both subject experts and collection managers.

Key issues for the natural sciences collections in the West Midlands:

- Resourcing documentation programmes and slow rate of progress
- Difficulty of increasing access to natural sciences collections – lack of space and resources for display
- Reduction in natural sciences specialists across the region (many museums had reduced staffing in last 5 years)
- Pressures on storage space particularly for “orphan” collections and inadequate storage
- Dearth of conservation specialists for natural sciences and taxidermists
- Need to look at collecting policies. Where does collecting now happen and how are these collections preserved in the long term? Need to have a regional overview of collecting.

Opportunities

- Growth of biodiversity and environmental agenda and how this could be tied into local biodiversity action plans and geology plans (LBAPs, LGAPs, Local Agenda 21)
- Growth of interest in the history of the study of natural sciences and its impact on society
- Renaissance in the Regions potential for funding (especially education in short term)
- Collection transfers (including rescuing of “orphan” collections) and appropriate re-location
- Funding opportunities for cataloguing (e.g. BSBI funds for herbaria, NHM for high level collection cataloguing)

Conclusion

There is still some way to go for the natural sciences collections at BM&AG. The future is very dependent on the Heritage Lottery supporting the project planning grant and ultimately the main bid. However the key achievements for the last few years are:

- The Natural History Advisory Board who continue to provide support, ideas and expertise
- The developing partnership with the University of Birmingham to bring together a regional resource for the natural sciences by joining our collections
- The Natural Sciences Collections Group providing local advocacy, networking and information sharing within West Midlands museums

I continue to be the sole contact for the natural sciences at BM&AG, answering 50 plus enquiries on the collections a year and responding to the continuing public comments on the lack of natural science displays at BM&AG.

Plant Cultures: botanical collections and the celebration of British Asian heritage

Julia Steele, Collections Manager, Economic Botany Collection Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Did you know that henna can be used in traditional medicine to treat headaches? Or did you know that Britain is the world's largest consumer of tea, drinking 70 billion cups a year? However, while world tea consumption is now increasing by 1% a year, production is exceeding this with an annual growth rate of 2%.

Henna (*Lawsonia inermis*) and tea (*Camellia sinensis*) are two of the twenty-five plants featured in *Plant Cultures*, an innovative partnership project funded by Culture Online and led by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Culture Online is a DCMS funded initiative which aims to enable more people to engage in culture in a variety of new ways www.cultureonline.gov.uk. *Plant Cultures* aims to do this through combining community-outreach programmes, an Internet resource and physical trails around botanic gardens and museums. It will give families, South Asian communities, lifelong learners and schoolchildren a unique insight

into the cultural and economic importance of plants from South Asia (India, Pakistan & Bangladesh). *Plant Cultures* aims to increase access to digital as well as to 'real' resources; museum and garden collections remain central throughout the project.



Model of cotton cleaner from Bengal. Donated by India Museum

South Asia is an ideal focus for the project because it is the source of so many plants central to British life such as tea, cotton and spices. There are also long-standing links in trade and government with South Asia, and large and diverse communities resident in Britain. Asian plants are an obvious resource for conveying the complex, multicultural histories of the plants and the communities in which they are used, to the widest possible audience. Asians are known to be under represented both as users of cultural resources and of the Internet. Engaging and relevant material is essential for encouraging new users to the Internet and visitors to cultural institutions.

Plant Cultures is a new and different type of project for Kew. While Kew does have experience in outreach work, partnerships with museums, and producing popular information about plants, these have not before been combined or approached in a project of this scale.

The three phases of the project are linked, but each has a distinct user experience. The outreach element of the project is integral to working with the project's target audience. Outreach sessions will look at current and past roles of plants in South Asian culture, covering the major regions and religions represented by the communities in England. Personal perspectives, in the form of written, spoken and videoed stories, will be collected and made available on the website. The focused outreach programme will be co-ordinated by an Outreach Officer based at Kew, and run by partners: Museum of London; Leicester City Museums, National Museums Liverpool, and Spice! in Bradford. An important element of the outreach work will handling sessions with the plants themselves. Groups will also have the opportunity of visiting Kew, here they will see the Living Collection in the gardens and glasshouses and be given behind the scenes tours of the Economic Botany Collection. The outreach programme will also promote the project and arrange a series of community activities in the last phase, including participation in local events and festivals targeted at Asian communities in the catchment areas of the four partner Museums. Stories about the use of the plants will be the main outcome of the outreach work, and will also be elicited through the website. The story library on the site will be a fascinating resource recording all uses of the plants gathered during the project, in many cases revealing unusual and previously undocumented uses which might otherwise be lost.

The website is the main outcome of *Plant Cultures* and is due for launch in November 2004. Content will be rich and include: information on 25 key plant species and 11 subject themes; stories about uses of the plants; activities; images; and formal educational material. Material is of intergenerational interest relating to everyday life and recent history.

Images on the website will illustrate plants in South Asian community life and culture from medieval times to the current day. They include: botanical art from the Library at Kew; Indian miniatures, paintings and manuscripts from the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine; similar material from the British Library's Oriental & India Office Collections; and prints and photographs from all three partners, illustrating different perspectives of British involvement in South Asia and recording the changing roles of plants in daily life and international trade. There will also be photographs of museum objects from Kew's Economic Botany Collection and the Victoria & Albert Museum's India and South East Asia Collections, highlighting the impact of plants on material culture.

At least 1500 images will be included altogether, many previously unpublished. In the case of the Economic Botany Collection at Kew it will allow public access to images of objects currently held in storage. The entire Collection numbers over 77,000 items, representing plants and their uses from around the world and ranging from archaeological specimens to the present-day. Objects include wet and dry plant parts, as well as artefacts made from plants and even models of them being used. The whole collection is botanically named and ordered according to its classification. While there is a permanent display of the Collection in the Plants+People exhibition at Museum No.1, the majority is housed in storage. *Plant Cultures* will enable the South Asian part of this collection to be digitised and made available to the public via the website.

Visitors to the website will be encouraged to extend their interest by planning a visit to a plant trail at a lo-

cal museum or botanic garden to see the 'real' collections. A variety of trails will be developed around existing resources, including garden-based trails at Kew and elsewhere, and museum or citywide trails in London, Leicester, Liverpool and other locations. Project materials, assistance from outreach officers, and seed money will be available to assist botanical gardens, museums and other organisations in setting up activities and trails. This will enable content generated by the project to reach as broad an audience as possible in a practical and cost effective way. Other ideas for users to extend their interest of these plants include an 'I Spy' guide to fruit and vegetables at Asian Markets, and instructions for growing the plants at home.

To date - April 2004 - the project is still in its early stages. The outreach work is due to start within the next six weeks and specifications for the website are being finalised. The project is due for completion in March 2005, although the life of the website and trails will extend well beyond this. Evaluation will be specific to individual phases of the project and include: extent of involvement with target audiences, user questionnaires, analysis of web statistics, and numbers of users of the website and trails. Overall the project is being assessed by Culture Online for its 'value for money'; the number of people reached through the project against the price spent per head. It is accepted that some parts of the project, such as the outreach work, are more costly than others. Long-term outcomes are also anticipated, such as a stimulation of interest in botany as it relates to day to day life; an increased use of cultural resources (including botanic gardens) by South Asian communities; and the development of lasting links among museums, botanic, gardens and community groups.

Visitor perceptions of human remains and their wider relevance to natural history

*Hugh Kilmister, Museum Administrator, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology,
University College London*

Firstly then, the idea that led to the undertaking of this research was an interest in finding out what visitors thought of the displays of ancient Egyptian human remains that are found in many United Kingdom museums. However I realise that this paper may not seem directly relevant to professionals working in Natural History collections, I have been made aware though that some Natural History collections do contain human remains. In addition the research involved in this paper deals with the ethics of display and what it is acceptable to present to the public and this ultimately affects us all.

The museum profession in Britain then has for the past decade taken on board the issues of the retention and display of human remains and recently this led to the creation of a working party charged with looking generally at these issues, and of course that report was published last Autumn with additions. (Post the working party report some collections have now started the task of auditing their collections for human remains). However what all of this previous research and the submissions to the working party have overlooked is how museum visitors, a main stakeholder, react to such displays – do they have an issue with human remains being displayed, do they think it is ethical or morally repugnant?

Since the retention and display of human remains can be viewed as such a contentious issue, by certain groups, it can be helpful to apply the following division – human remains that have cultural descendants ie. Native American and Aboriginal remains amongst others and the less contentious group of remains that have no living cultural descendants ie. ancient Egyptian.

Working in the field of Egyptology it was natural for me to investigate this less contentious group with museum visitors. However the conclusions I reached might be a useful starting point when working on collections that display and store the more contentious remains as well as those collections that have had complaints about their primate displays for example and are considering future re-display.

This research was also prompted by what seemed to be a contradiction happening in London in 2002, namely 840,000 of the public visiting Gunther Von Hagens' *BodyWorlds* exhibition of 32 plastinated "human" bodies on the one hand, whilst at the same time the working party on human remains was collecting evidence on how best we could deal with the problem of having human remains as part of our collections. Therefore I was interested to see if the museum profession was becoming unduly sensitive over the issues surrounding human remains by using their own audience as an indicator. Would the public agree that it was inappropriate for museums to still continue to hold these remains or did they wholeheartedly approve