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## The Biology Curator

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## 2. The Inks

The first of the two inks to come to note was the indelible ink which was being used by certain departments at the Natural History Museum (Pitkin, 1995). However this is considerably inferior to the NMW's current system of handprinting labels and cannot be recommended. It appears with alcoholic collections the image will initially fade but remain readable. However in increasingly waterbased fluids the ink continues to run causing a smudgy appearance and eventually becomes very faint, despite the fact this is advertised as a waterproof ink! However the PermaDri ink proves to be very different giving a non fading image in both alcohol and formaldehyde based preserving fluids. This probably relates to the fact that this a pigment based ink. This thus allows computer generated labels to be produced for fluid collection specimens greatly improving the use of the curator or conservators time in collection based work.

### Conclusion

Resistall paper would still be the preferred choice for fluid collection labelling. However if this paper does become unavailable then the Goatskin Parchment would be usable, especially with alcohol based fluid collections.

The Indelible ink is however unsuitable for use in fluid collection labelling although it will retain a readable image in alcoholic fluids (stability probably relates to the water content of the fluid). The PermaDri ink however has proved very satisfactory for used in fluid collection labelling and as a result can be recommended.

### Note on deskjet refill systems

Both of the inks tested are available as refill packs for the inkjet cartridges. Despite manufacturers instructions this always seems to be a messy business so care is advised to prevent black fingers or splodges on your clothing! Problems can occur with the refilled cartridges depositing drops of ink on the paper. If this happens block the breather hole on the top of the cartridge with some sticky tape over the top. If the jets on the cartridge remain or become blocked then wiping carefully with a dilute detergent solution such as Decon 90 will help clear the jets.

### References

- Lambiris, A.J.L. 1990. Herpetological Collections, in E.M.Herholdt (Ed) Natural History Collections - their Management and Value, Transvaal Museum Special Publications No.1, pp13 - 26.
- Pettitt, C. 1976. Label materials for wet preserved biological specimens, *Museums Journal* 75 (4) 174 - 176
- Pitkin, B., 1995. Labelling specimens in the life science departments at the Natural History Museum, London using computers.
- Ross, G.C. 1961. Labels for biological materials, *Museum Journal* 61 (3) 177 - 179.

### Suppliers

Misco Computer Supplies Ltd  
Freeport  
Wellingborough

Northants  
NN8 6BR  
Tel: 0181 207 4414  
Preservation Equipment Ltd  
Shelfanger  
Diss  
Norfolk  
IP22 2DG  
Tel: 01379 651527  
Fax: 01379 650582  
Arjo Wiggins  
Sample and Advisory Service  
Tel: 0800 993300  
Fax: 013223335620

## UK Systematics Forum, Insect Collections Group

In *The Biology Curator*, No. 5 Mark Shaw described the recently formed group of collection managers of the major insect collections in the British Isles, which is operating under the auspices of the UK Systematics Forum. The group held its third meeting at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin on 22nd March and some points of general interest are briefly summarised below.

**Storage Systems.** Insect cabinets of the design recently developed by the Natural History Museum, London have now been ordered by two other member collections of the group and they are being considered by other museums. Pending publication of more details of these metal, pest-proof cabinets anyone interested should contact Nigel Fergusson (0171 938 8919 or email ndmf@nhm.ac.uk) for more information. Drawer sizes regarded as standard and likely to be purchased in the future are being investigated with a view to developing common specifications and co-ordinating ordering.

**Pest Control.** The two-day courses on pest control in museums held at the NHM are now open to outsiders. Details from Phil Ackery (0171 938 9346 or email pra@nhm.ac.uk). The cost is £100.

**Charging Policies.** The group identified benefits of realistic standardised charges for commercial enquiries, etc. It is also clear that as a result of pressure from curators, particularly those in university and national museums, provision for 'bench fees' is now included in many research grant applications for projects involving collections. However, grant giving bodies varied considerably in their willingness to fund such expenses. An item for future discussion by the group is charging for certain kinds of loans.

**Databases/checklists/the British fauna.** Mark Shaw reported that his article in the January *Antenna* (The Royal Entomological Society's bulletin) had stimulated a good response. The RES has established a standing committee to identify the society's rôle and

commitment to the British insect fauna. At the NHM a new programme of work is being developed on the British insect fauna, including the collections, and involving maintaining a taxonomic database. This is partly in response to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

**Collections – scope for rationalisation.** The group agreed that there is very little scope for rationalisation (between institutions) of current holdings. Any benefits would be far outweighed by the various costs involved. The real scope for rationalisation between collections lies in future acquisitions.

Anyone wanting to find out more about any of these topics, or make any comments, is encouraged to contact **any** member of the group (listed with contact details in *The Biology Curator* 5:5). The next meetings is to be held in Cardiff in early November, when new topics for discussion will include deposition and curation of survey and voucher material and the collections of deceased amateurs.

Mike Fitton, *The Natural History Museum, London*  
(0171 938 9446, email: mgf@nhm.ac.uk).

## CULTIVATED VOUCHERS IN HERBARIA

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North-west England is an area rich in historic gardens which have been a major route for plant introductions since the late 18th century and which continues up to the present day. It is not surprising, therefore, that cultivated vouchers are relatively strongly represented in the Liverpool Museum herbarium (LIV) in that more than 13,000 of our 300,000 specimens appear to be of garden origin. I would like to highlight a few of the problems this poses, and outline some solutions which are being applied here.

### 1. Who is the collector?

It is obvious that cultivated vouchers have two kinds of collectors: the person who pressed the specimen (preparator), and the person who obtained plants or propagules in the wild (field collector). From the point of view of curatorship, determining who was the field collector is sometimes problematical even though their identity is a pointer to the site and date of the introduction from the wild. From a nomenclatural point of view it may be more significant to record the name of the person who prepared the dried specimen, especially if they were also responsible for naming it and for first publishing the name. A further category of collector is the person who amassed the collection (the herbarium or garden proprietor). Museum collection records can confuse these three categories of collector, and when documenting such collections on computer it is necessary to differentiate between them.

### 2. What is the date of collection?

Confusion over dates of collection is widespread; for example, in the J.E. Smith herbarium<sup>1</sup> a date sometimes appears as part of the specimen data, but this refers to the date of preparation rather than of collection in the field. Examination of watermarks has shown that some collections were mounted up in batches, and this helped to confirm that the dates were not those of collection in the wild. In the Joseph Dickinson herbarium<sup>2</sup> the widespread practice of noting the year in which the plant was first introduced to cultivation in Britain is believed to have been followed. Although dates from the 18th century and earlier clearly belong to this category, it is more difficult to deal with recent introductions because not all the dates recorded by Dickinson agree with the conventional published dates of introduction such as those found in *Hortus cantabrigiensis*.

### 3. Where are the specimens filed?

In principle, all our cultivated vouchers are filed in separate folders within the familial and generic sequence of the Extra-European herbarium. Thus the 'cultivated' category is treated as being equivalent to a geographical area of the kind adopted in most large herbaria. However, this presupposes that the specimen is clearly a cultivated one; but many occupy a grey area between obvious cultivated status and definite wild origin. Indeed the folders should more correctly be labelled 'cultivated or unlocalised', since specimens with no obvious provenance are filed here *faut de mieux*. There has also been a tendency, when filing specimens of British origin, to incorporate cultivated vouchers into the main British and Irish herbarium because they arrived as an integral part of a collection acquired from elsewhere. While preparing a database of Red Data Book specimens from the British and Irish herbarium which supposedly contains only wild-gathered plants, I found that 150 of the 4000-odd specimens were either clearly labelled as being of garden origin, or were labelled as coming from sites remote from their known native distribution in the UK. Most of these latter sites were later found to be the places where the 'collectors' lived.

### 4. Why prepare vouchers of cultivated plants?

Although garden plants are generally more accessible than plants gathered in the wild, and certainly the facilities for pressing them should be far better, this does not mean that collections are rich in such material. It is understandable that garden staff are sometimes unenthusiastic at the prospect of seeing their flowering material hacked off and pressed, never again to be seen by their visitors. This is particularly true of the plants most highly prized for showing, such as Orchids. On the other hand, garden plants (especially those of wild origin which are not pre-selected to be easily propagated) have only a 'half-life' in cultivation; they 'decay' at varying rates dependent on factors such as their susceptibility to pests and diseases, their longevity as perennials, or changing fashions in decorative planting. This is an area where further research is needed, especially where *ex-situ* conservation is the aim. 'Press them before you lose them' might therefore be an appropriate policy, in line with the precautionary principle.