

Views from the other side of the bird: users' perspectives on bird collections

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Zool. Med. Leiden 79-3 (12), 30-ix-2005, 131-136.— ISSN 0024-0672.

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Keywords: museum collections.

Bird collections are an increasingly valuable resource for the scientific and artistic communities. A number of recommendations are made which should facilitate legitimate use of bird collections, and help to justify the continued support of these collections.

1. If staffing limitations hinder the legitimate use of an institution's collections, this situation should be used as justification for better funding.
2. Online catalogues have a valuable but limited role in facilitating research; directors of institutions must be made aware that such catalogues do not diminish the role of the curatorial staff.
3. All stakeholders must accept their responsibility to prevent further marginalization of museum collections.
4. In many cases the value of having rare artefacts on public display is greater than the risk to those items, and so institutions should consider placing a greater proportion of their most valuable artefacts on display to the public.
5. Institutions should develop and publish guidelines on acceptable uses of their collections and a list of applicable fees if such fees are appropriate. These guidelines should include a description of the procedures involved in applying for access to the collection.

Introduction

Research utilizing bird collections is entering an exciting new phase. The increasing concern about biological conservation has emphasized the traditional roles of bird collections in the study of taxonomy, illustration, form and function and migration. Illustrators continue to rely on collected specimens in order to depict birds accurately. However, it also means that specimens are now being used in ways that collectors could not have imagined, further increasing their value. Collections are an incredible source of material for the taxonomist who utilizes genetic analysis, as each specimen is a representative of the population at an instant in time (Payne & Sorenson, 2003). This is particularly true of specimens of endangered and extinct species. With improving technology small samples of material from specimens can provide us with insight into the diet of birds in generations past, or changes in the levels, and impacts of, environmental contaminants (Green & Scharlemann, 2003).

Despite the increased value of bird collections, they cannot advance our understanding and appreciation of the natural world if researchers and artists do not have reasonable access to the specimens. In this paper an attempt is made to summarize the impressions of the operation of museums with birds collections by those who use them. Five recommendations are made which could help facilitate legitimate use without increasing the risk to precious specimens.

Staffing limitations which hinder legitimate use of collections

Every user of ornithological collections realizes that the second most important aspect of an institution, after the birds themselves, is the curatorial staff. Most museums with substantial collections of bird are staffed by knowledgeable curators who are outstanding facilitators, making the utilization of specimens an entirely positive experience. At these institutions requests for assistance are answered promptly with grace and enthusiasm. If access to the collection is temporarily compromised because of a change in infrastructure or personnel every attempt is made to assist the user in the most timely fashion.

Regrettably, there are museums in Europe with substantial ornithological holdings that have a reputation for being unwilling or unable to provide reasonable access to their research collections. Repeated requests for assistance by post, by FAX and by e-mail remain unanswered, regardless of the language of the request, and regardless of the credentials of the person making the request. Although these examples are uncommon, given that one of the primary purposes of such institutions is to facilitate legitimate use of the collection, these cases are extremely unfortunate and hinder research.

In some rare cases the problem seems to be one of uncooperative personnel, leaving users with few alternatives. More frequently the problem results from limitations of staffing, which is not overly surprising in an era of fiscal restraint. However, if an institution cannot provide an adequate level of service to users because of limited resources, surely this should serve as the basis for a legitimate claim for better funding for the institution. If better funding is not likely to be made available, it may be that the directors of the institution face some difficult decisions about the future of their collections.

The limited role of online catalogues

Online catalogues of museum holdings represent an important step forward and facilitate the rapid transfer of information. Institutions are to be congratulated on providing the resources necessary to make this information available to the greatest possible number of users. However, there are risks involved in making such information widely available. For instance, publishing collection localities of specimens whose populations are now endangered might facilitate illegal exploitation. In those few cases where the institution decides not to publish particularly sensitive material online, the decisions are clearly based on sound judgment.

By their nature, online catalogues can provide only a limited amount of information about each specimen. Such catalogues can supplement, but they will never replace the institutional and ornithological knowledge provided by curators. For instance, the online catalogue of the Field Museum in Chicago (<http://fm1.fieldmuseum.org/collections/search.cgi>) indicates that its two specimens of Labrador Duck *Camptorhynchus labradorius* (Gmelin, 1789) were collected at Grand Manan Island, Canada. The curatorial staff of the Museum were able to expand on this information, explaining that no one is quite sure where the specimens were collected (D. Willard, pers. comm.). It is essential that those in control of the finances of research collections know that online catalogues can supplement, but cannot replace, proper curatorial staff. Long term institutional commitment to support for proper curatorial staff is essential, as online material represents merely an abstract of the wealth of information available.

Marginalization of bird collections

It is good news that some bird collections (e.g. Natural History Museum, Dublin) are going through a rebirth after a period of neglect. However, some other major natural history collections have been marginalised, despite their obvious value to the artistic and scientific communities, and to the public.

Some institutions (e.g. Staatliches Museum für Tierkunde, Dresden) have maintained their research collections but have eliminated or greatly reduced public access to displays of natural history artefacts. More than one European natural history collection is facing an uncertain future as the research portion of museum operations are reduced. All of their substantial holdings are going into storage, with no long-term plans. Material in long-term storage is clearly not accessible for legitimate research. Even worse, it is likely that long-term storage will result in damage and loss. For instance, the natural history holdings of the Musée Picardie in Amiens, France, is comparatively small, but contains some significant ornithological material, including rare specimens of extinct species. When visited by the senior author in 2003, the bird collection was housed in a dusty warehouse, next to molding herbarium sheets. The Museum's most recent bird catalogue is over 100 years old and most of the specimens are missing, presumed destroyed by WWII bombing.

The scientific community must accept some responsibility for the perceived diminished value of museum collections. Some ornithologists feel that a drop of blood can provide all of the important information about the bird, which is clearly not the case. A colleague described this attitude as "a travesty, and anything that can be done to change this is warranted." All stakeholders, including museum staff, collection users, and the public, must ensure that funding agencies recognize the value of maintaining natural history collections. The future of bird collections relies on this recognition.

Protection versus utilization

A small number of institutions with valuable artefacts do not seem to have the resources or the motivation to adequately protect the specimens in their care. Most collection users have seen irreplaceable objects exposed to direct sunlight or to dust, and left vulnerable to theft. Fortunately, these situations appear to be quite rare.

Conversely, some institutions appear to be overly protective of their collection. When institutions have both research collections and public displays, we believe that there is tremendous value in having some of the most valuable specimens, even those that are irreplaceable, on public display. Real artefacts have the ability to inspire in a way that replicas cannot. Replicas are often poor representations of reality, and cannot replace original specimens in exciting the interest of museum patrons. The world's great art museums would receive few visitors if only replicas of paintings and sculptures were on display for fear of damage to the original works.

Author Lewis Carol took young Alice Liddel and her sisters to the Natural History Museum in Oxford (Gardner, 2000). While there, they presumably saw the Museum's remains of the Dodo. That species is featured prominently in the book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and that book has resulted in the Dodo being an icon of the conservation movement (Fuller, 2002). The Dodo remains on display have now been replaced by

replicas. We strongly doubt that either Lewis Carol or the Liddel sisters would have been as impressed with the display if a label had said "replica", as it does today.

Written policies concerning collection use

When it comes to access to a collection all institutions have operational practices, but it appears that very few have formalized these practices as policies. This leaves some users believing that curatorial decisions are often arbitrary and do not reflect real concerns about protection of specimens. An institution's curatorial staff have the difficult task of attempting to balance use and preservation; this requires sound judgment and tact. However, arbitrary decisions have no role to play in facilitating the legitimate use of collections and the appreciation of the great value of collections by the scientific and artistic communities.

We suggest that institutions with significant natural history collections construct, and provide on their websites, a set of policies concerning collection use. Below are the policies that we feel would be most valuable to potential users.

1. A description of what the institution sees as legitimate uses for the collection could reduce concerns about arbitrary administrative decisions. This description should be reasonably comprehensive. If an artist working on a book can examine the egg of an extinct species, would art students working to refine their craft also have access to the collection?
2. If the institution provided an expected processing time for replies to requests for information or assistance, then the user would know when a follow-up inquiry was appropriate.
3. The potential user should be made aware of the procedure involved in applying for access to the collection, including an appropriate lead time.
4. In order to clarify the institution's policy on collection use, examples should be provided of recent projects that have been conducted. Examples of proposed work that was not permitted are also valuable and should be accompanied by a justification.
5. Users would benefit from a list of services that could be expected from the institution (e.g., photographic work, duplication of documents), and a statement about rights to images and information retained by the institution.
6. Misunderstandings could be avoided by a description of restrictions on users while in the collection.
7. Some collection users perceive fees as disincentives, which are not applied universally to all users, and designed only to reduce the workload on the staff. To help alleviate these concerns the institution should publish a list of fees that are likely to apply, if those fees are justified, and if they really generate significant income for the institution. A more thorough treatment of the impact of user fees on artistic endeavours is provided by Richford (2003).

Looking for statements about legitimate collection uses and fees, we examined the official websites of the six European museums and eight American museums with the largest ornithological collections, as ranked by Mearns & Mearns (1998). In Europe,

these institutions were: Museum of Natural History, Tring, UK; Zoological Institute, Russian Academy of Science, St. Petersburg, Russia; Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium; Museum für Naturkunde der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, Germany; Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France; and National Museum of Natural History (Naturalis), Leiden, Netherlands. In North America, these institutions were: American Museum of Natural History, New York; National Museum of Natural History - Smithsonian, Washington; Field Museum, Chicago; Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge; Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley; Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; and Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh.

Most museum websites described the scope of their collections and many describe research being conducted by museum staff. A few institutions described their loans and consumptive analysis policies, often in great detail. None described any service fees.

Only five of the 18 institutions provided guidance about the sorts of visitors that would be permitted to access the research collections and the sorts of use to which the material might be subjected. Three of these were vague, stating only that access to the collection was granted to: "any qualified member of the scientific community and other interested persons" (University of Michigan, <http://www.ummz.lsa.umich.edu/birds/loan.html>); "scientists, graduate students and others from around the world" (Smithsonian, <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/vert/birds/brdvisit.html>); and "research scientists, graduate students, and other visitors with a scientific interest" (Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, <http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/mvz/collections/access.html>). These statements are so vague as to suggest that anyone with an interest in birds would be given access to the research collection, which is clearly not the case for most institutions. The Smithsonian's website explained that "the collection... (is) not open to the general public for tours, general browsing, artistic ventures or other activities that might disrupt the scientific users."

The remaining two institutions were more explicit, stating "the collections are normally only available to those, whether amateur or professional, engaged in original research or the production of artwork intended for publication" (Tring, <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/zoology/tring/birdgroup.html>); and "collections... are open to professional scientists and students for the purpose of non-commercial scientific research" (Berlin, <http://www.museum.hu-berlin.de/zool/samml/mammal.asp?lang=1>).

It is suggested that by generating formal policies institutions would be forced to re-examine past practices and decide if those policies were just and did the best job of facilitating legitimate use while ensuring the safety of specimens.

Acknowledgements

Spencer G. Sealy and David Prescott provided valuable input during the construction of the presentation given at the Third European Conference on Bird Collections, Leiden, 2003. We are grateful to participants of this Conference for their feedback, which was both supportive and challenging, and to René Dekker for facilitating our involvement at Leiden. Lisa Chilton and Peter Howlett provided valuable comments on this manuscript.

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Received: 16.iv.2004

Accepted: 15.i.2005

Edited: P. Howlett & C. van Achterberg