

Integrating Fieldwork and the Cole Museum in Zoology

Context

Zoological and ecological employers have highlighted a general deficiency in the taxonomic skills of graduates, yet 89% of Part 1 zoology students aim to pursue careers in zoological or applied ecological research for which good taxonomic skills are essential.

The Cole Museum of Zoology is an internationally recognised educational resource. However the curation of the museum requires considerable time and resources, which staff are often unable to provide to the required level due to other work commitments.

Aim

This project sought to further integrate the Cole Collection in to undergraduate teaching and learning by encouraging students studying zoology to play a more active role in the curation of the museum. Those students who attend the zoology field course will present their fieldwork in several new display cases in the museum.

The aim is to provide students with the opportunity to gain taxonomic and curatorial skills which they will be able to transfer in to real life situations, thus increasing their employability.

Resources and Processes

The project was managed by the Cole Museum Curator, Dr Amanda Callaghan, with support from a Project Officer based within the department.

The initial challenge was the recruitment of volunteers and engaging them in the museum's activities, leading to the Cole Museum Volunteer Group being set up. The volunteers work in the museum one afternoon during term-time on the ongoing maintenance and restoration of the Cole Collections, including the photographic documentation of the specimens. This will be used to create a stand-alone digital catalogue of the collections, be part of an updated museum website, and will also be incorporated in to the Animal Diversity CD-Rom used in teaching a Part 3 module.

In addition new materials and furnishings, including new exhibit cases, have been bought for the museum, along with reference books, laptops and state-of-the-art equipment. Ecological field equipment was also bought for use on the Part 2 field courses.

Results

In 05/06 there were only two volunteers in the Cole Museum. In 06/07 this number had increased to 12, and in Oct 07 the Curator was able to choose a new cohort of 7 volunteers from those students who had attended the field courses in July. The number of volunteers was deliberately reduced this year to be more manageable for the Curator, and to allow her to provide more detailed and rigorous training in the key aspects of natural history curation.

The Cole Museum student volunteers were given the task of designing and implementing a special exhibit in the museum that bridges the gap between their fieldwork and the museum. The volunteers therefore gain experience and expertise in working in a professional museum environment, which has allowed them to develop their zoological and taxonomic skills.

Sustainability

Over the lifetime of the project a methodology for recruiting student volunteers, through the mandatory field courses, has developed that provides a workable number of volunteers for the Curator. The links between the practical learning opportunities on the field courses and the further integration of the Cole Collections in teaching are therefore established and sustainable.

Further information

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