

Increasing Capacity for Small Natural History Collections: Developing Protocol for Volunteer-Based Inventorying Programs

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Who We Are

- Second oldest natural history museum in the country
 - started in 1825
- Size of collection
 - approximately 45,000 to 55,000 pieces.
- Mixed institution
 - Natural History Museum, Science Center, & Zoo
 - collections preservation is not our #1 priority.
- Current staff started in summer of 2013 and winter 2014
 - Prior to current staff we had a ten year gap with no trained collections personnel in the building.
 - we are in the early phases of getting a handle on things.
- Current collections staff is still small
 - One staffer is 3 days a week
 - Other staffer is 1 day a week.



Challenges

Our challenges can be placed into three categories.

- 1) Resources
- 2) Training & Institutional Culture
- 3) Intellectual Assets



Challenges with Resources

- Overcrowding.
- Lax accessioning over the years and non-mission related accessions.
- Limited staffing and budget.



Challenges with Training & Institutional Culture

- Mixing of permanent and educational collections objects in collections storage facilities.
- Unsupervised volunteers working on the collections.
- Inconsistent handling procedures by staff and volunteers.
- Over the years rather than pulling from the collection, staff relied on the use of external loans for programs and exhibits.



Challenges with Intellectual Accessibility



- The collection has never been fully inventoried.
- Most items have old pre-EcoTarium catalog numbers, not accession numbers.
- Inconsistent quality of data management by staff and volunteers.

Overcoming Challenges

- What can we do with current resources?
- What goals can we not reach without additional resources?
- We applied for an IMLS grant to help us create a sustainable volunteer-based inventory system so that we can get a better handle on the collections.

Resources

Problem

1. Overcrowding
2. Lax accessioning over the years, non mission related accessions.
3. Limited staffing and budget.

Solution

1. Leverage institutional history to sort out what is part of the collection and what is not (pre-grant).
2. Install a Collections Committee (pre-grant).
3. Increase our volunteer-based collections workforce (with grant).
Reach out to other museums for peer troubleshooting (with grant).

Training & Institutional Culture

Problem

1. Mixing of permanent and educational materials in collections storage facilities.
2. Inconsistent handling procedures by staff and volunteer.
3. Over the years rather than pulling from the collection, staff pulled on the use of external loans for programs and exhibits.
4. Unsupervised volunteers working on the collections.

Solution

1. Careful weeding before inventory by staff (pre-grant).
2. All volunteers and staff must undergo a collections 101 training program before being permitted to handle collections (pre-grant).
3. Empower staff through training and increased access (pre-grant)
4. Intense training, recruitment, and oversight procedures (with grant).

Intellectual Access

Problem

1. The collection has never been fully inventoried.
2. Most items have old pre-EcoTarium catalog numbers, not accession numbers.
3. Inconsistent quality of data management by staff and volunteers.

Solution

1. Creation of VBI system (with grant).
2. INV numbering system (pre-grant)
3. Creation of standardized volunteer training and inputting manual (with grant).

Questions?

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