

DOCUMENTATION OF THE NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTION – CASE STUDY

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The specimens in natural history collections are often diverse and complex by nature. Natural history collections may be organic (such as birds and mammals), inorganic (such as rocks and minerals), organic/inorganic composites (such as shells, some fossils, and bone). Specimens are collected by the Scientists/ Field Collectors from a vast array of natural environments. The one thing most natural history specimens have in common is that they are usually prepared before being added to the collection.

Documentation is the collections management information of the physical characteristics, location, intellectual significance and legal status of collection items, as well as the collections management processes they undergo and their use in education, research and exhibitions. Collections information is part of an ongoing process, with documentation residing in many formats, including documentary files (e.g. field notes and logbooks, illustrations, and photographs), electronic information systems, and multi-media formats. The value of collections information lies in its quality, integrity, comprehensiveness, and potential for use for research, publication and educational purposes.

Collections of the biological origin form the basis for our understanding of the world. Scientists use these natural history collections to look at questions of evolution and global atmospheric change. As non-renewable resources, natural history collections document disappearing habitats, species extinction, and disappearing geological and paleontological natural sites. Documentation of the natural history specimens plays a vital role in the presence of a species at a specific location and time.

Documentation is the fundamental activity in a museum and is used as a basic source of information for the collection. Comprehensive documentation is the important activity and essential for providing information such as pictograph, analytical report etc for authentication at the time loan, transfer to outdoor display, theft etc. and for the effective management of collection, encompassing storage, security, auditing and insurance, to enable to collection for the education, research or publication.

Documentation of the natural history specimen is based on collection, photography to identify the natural shape, size, condition and colour, classification of the specimen based of taxonomy, accessioning, indexing, cataloging measuring, marking and photography etc. Documentation is also important at the time of conservation of the specimen. During the conservation process, the documentation of the specimen in conservation is also very important to the Taxidermist/ Conservator to make comparative chart/ observation of before and after conservation of the specimen.

The Accession number identifies each natural history specimen in the collection in a unique way. It will never be given to any other object in the museum. It is the key to accessing all documents comprising the museum's documentation system, because it allows each object to be linked to the documents referring to it. It should be attached to the every object. In the case of Regional Museum of Natural History, Bhopal, there is no accession number followed. The simple list of specimens is maintained. To provide the accession number to the each specimen, it has been suggested to the administration department. It is under process to start the accession number to the each specimen.

The Accession register The accession register is an official administrative document of the museums. All specimens in the collection should be listed in it in chronological order of accession number. It proves that the object belongs to the museum collection. The accession Register serves as the basis for setting up the museum's entire documentation system. It is called as memory of the museum. In case of natural history specimens, it has many columns to enter the date of collection, collector's name, location etc besides that some information about the specimen is mandatory to write like as common name, kingdom, phylum, class, order, genus, species, size, colour, condition and photograph of the specimen. In case of Regional Museum of Natural History, Bhopal, there is no accession register to enter the information about the specimen. It was suggested to the administration section of the museum. Now it has been considered to print the accession register to maintain the record of specimen of the museum. It is under print as per required columns. The number and record about the natural history collection of the museum is recorded in computer system and print out of the same is also kept in the related file/ folder. The same record is referred as per requirement. Photographs are also kept in photography unit.

The information related to the specimen type as zoological, botanical or geological is practiced by the Taxidermist. "Z" for zoological, "B" for botanical and "G" for geological specimens. Similarly M, R, Av, Ar etc are also in practiced for mammals, reptiles, aves, arthropods respectively to identify the specimen easily.

The Catalogue Card: The catalogue card is the basic file of the documentation system. The cards in it are classified in ascending order of accession number, in the same order as the accession register. They should not be removed from the catalogue. For this reason they are perforated at the bottom and held in place in the file by a metal bar. These catalogue cards show the location code of the object concerned. This is why the card catalogue should not be made publicly available. In the Regional Museum of Natural History, Bhopal is not in practiced till now. It would be making practice in future by suggesting to competent authority of the museum.

The documentation of the natural history specimen is must be done before and after the conservation or restoration of the specimen. There are some points to be completed before conservation like date of received, accession number of specimen, name of specimen, size of specimen, received from, causes of deterioration, observation by the Taxidermist/ conservator, any remarks by the Taxidermist, photograph of the specimen. Similarly after conservation of the specimen some points should be completed by the Taxidermist or Conservator as treatment given to specimen, date of return, photograph of the specimen and some recommendation for future to

protect the specimen from the deterioration agents for a long time. In Regional Museum of Natural History, Bhopal above information before and after conservation is in practice by the Taxidermist. For this, the Taxidermist has the proforma as status chart or condition report card of the specimen.