

## RTD04 Bird collection management: an information network initiative

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### 1 Issues

Information contained within biological collections is a key resource for countries fulfilling their obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and other significant environment conventions. With the DARWIN DECLARATION (Environment Australia, 1998), scientists worldwide agreed upon the value, importance and significance of biological collections as... "*records of genetic and morphological variation, past and recent geographical distribution and other biological information.*" Therein, too, the tasks, aims and obligations of institutions housing biological collections, such as museums and universities, are clearly defined: collections (and their contingent information) have to be documented, stored safely and given free access. Especially for issues of nature conservation in third world countries, repatriation of biodiversity data is essential, as species-locality data for birds are often available only from museum specimens.

Despite unconditional acceptance of these needs by politicians and nature conservation and scientific communities, there has been only limited progress in specimen data-basing, fundamental to any data repatriation; and the "virtual world bird collection on the internet" is still a distant vision. Lack of financial support and manpower in biological collections are the reasons. Apart from a few key collections (e.g. Australian bird collections generally and the Africa-collection in Tervuren, Belgium) or key areas (Mexico within CONABIO, Colombia within BioMAP, or the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network, IABIN), little progress has been made in data-sharing either.

### 2 Outcomes

Many curators and scientists at the RTD made strong statements that virtual data repatriation should have priority over curatorial initiatives. Obstacles nominated were lack of funding (outside of the U.S.A. only?), security risks and copyright, as well as compatibility of databases. The latter could be overcome by an agreement on international standards now in progress. The University of Kansas offered its software (The Species Analyst) for use free of charge, though many institutions are bound to specific database

programs by prior agreements. Moreover, meta database software, as operated by GEF in Bogor, Indonesia, is better than specimen-based models for such exchange.

For African museums, the situation is probably the least advanced and most difficult. Although the PAOC is said to be preparing an inventory of its continent's bird collections, African museums are now facing hard times: some are submerged in consortia and others have been without curators for years. Programs for training taxidermists and curators are urgently needed, as well as information on bird distribution vital for conservation prioritization.

In Europe, an inventory of major bird collections is seen as a first step towards documenting holdings in research institutes and museums (Roselaar, in press). The inventory gives summary data on European collections, covering their holdings of species, their history, whereabouts and curation. A preliminary estimate puts European and North American collections at about 4 million avian study skins each; another c. 1 million are held in institutions elsewhere in the world, a quarter of which are in Australia. The largest avian collections within Europe are held at the British Natural History Museum, Tring, its holdings four- or five-fold greater than those of the largest collections on the continent, at Leiden, St. Petersburg, Paris, Tervuren and Berlin. None are yet fully data-based. Most study skins, including type specimens and ancient historical material, are nevertheless spread over a large number of smaller collections in diverse European countries, and are partly data-based.

European bird curators now meet every two years to progress matters. A general inventory of biological research collections (ZEFOD) has now begun in Germany, covering holdings of botanical and zoological gardens as well. Similar programs are underway in other countries, such as Australia. Within the German contribution to GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility), a virtual catalogue of vertebrate type specimens is being funded by the German Federal Research Ministry. RTD attendants agreed to further communicate and spread information on activities concerning specimen data-basing and fund-raising via a newsletter, for which the contribution address is majordomo@nhm.ac.uk, with the subject title "ebeac".