

Let's do it together – EDIT directors of collections on their way towards agreed col- lection management standards and principles

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Any collection of certain extent needs to be managed to ensure long-term preservation and accessibility. This also applies to natural history collections. Starting with the massive growth of natural history collections in the 19th Century, methods, standards, and procedures in the management of these specific collections have been developed and (more or less) formalized through institutional policies and principles. This process has not come to an end. Because of increasing knowledge, the development of new techniques and societal changes, policies have continuously been adapted and changed and this process will go on in the future.

It is surprising that regardless diverse and close cooperation between collections managers all over the world, policies have often been developed in institutional isolation differing from one to the other even in fundamental details. This especially applies to Europe where for historical reasons natural history collections have developed independently in many different ways. But it is even more surprising that it took two hundred years to bring together staff at decision-taking level to talk to each other and start thinking about new ways of managing and developing collections in order to prepare them for the demands of collection based research in the 21st Century.

EDIT facilitated the initiation of such a group. Heads and directors of collections of EDIT institutions met for the first time in Leiden in June 2008 to discuss the needs for joint efforts towards common collection management policies and strategies. Ever since, they have met on a regular basis; both with the full audience and in a smaller working group. Now, three years after the first meeting, the enthusiasm of the group has not decreased. They just expressed their wish to continue after the end of EDIT by setting up a

business plan of the new structure, the European Collection Policy Board.

The coordinator of the EDIT group, Dr. Christiane Quaiser, wanted to know what it is that makes this group so attracting. To get an inside view she asked Dr. René Dekker, Director of Collections at the Netherland Centre for Biodiversity Naturalis in Leiden, about his view on the past and future of this initiative and the reason why he spend much of his valuable time on this initiative.



Fig. 1:
Dr René Dekker,
Director of Collec-
tions at the Nether-
land Centre for Bio-
diversity Naturalis in
Leiden and head of
ca. 37 mio. objects,
in 'his' collection.
(photo: NCB Naturalis)

René, what is a "Director of Collections"? - Do you like your job?

"A Director or Head of Collections, who is often also a member of the institutional management team, is responsible for the definition and implementation of policies and standards in the collections under his care. This also includes supervision of the day-to-day curation of the collections. So this job is very multifaceted with new challenges every day. Not all museums have got a Director or Head of Collections. Especially in smaller institutions these tasks are often taken on by the General Director."

"Whether I like my job? - The fact that so many colleagues are jealous about what I do, gives the answer: "YES"! [He laughs.] When I was a child I used to search the beach for dead birds to collect their skulls and wings. I had the dream of having a museum of my own. In this sense I am now more or less living my dream and it is even more exciting since we are in the middle of a merger of four Dutch natural history collections into a single large national centre for biodiversity. Everything - from collections facilities to staff structures – is changing and I am part of this process. I can't think of anything I would prefer more."

Why is it useful to have a working group of Directors of Collections? Don't we have enough working groups? – How come that you are so enthusiastic about this initiative?

"The DoC initiative brought together 'hands on' practitioners faced with the same objectives and challenges concerning collection management and development. The deep knowledge within this group of experts and the willingness to share experiences was much beyond expectation and incredibly stimulating. From the beginning, there has been a certain confidence. No one was afraid of showing weaknesses of his collection, but was open to discuss it and learn from it. In the meantime, questions are specifically brought into the group for advice or support. Numerous ideas about policies, standards and best practise popped up, simply by exchanging experiences and "looking into each others kitchen". And last but not least: they are such nice colleagues, all as enthusiastic as I am. To be able to share your thoughts with someone and to be understood gives you a good feeling. And it also saves time and money to have someone you can ask for advice. – So, why should I NOT be enthusiastic?!"



Fig. 2. A group of enthusiastic people: Participants of the third EDIT workshop of Directors of Collections in Tervuren, May 2010. (photo: C. Quaisser)

Apart from knowing each other and related institutions much better now, what are the most valuable, most tangible results of this group after the three years work?

"Our biggest achievement so far is the document on "common principles and standards for research loans". The related MoU has now been signed by twelve EDIT partners and with distribution outside EDIT, I am sure, more institutions will follow. The problems of research loans had by far our highest priority. Not a single member could not report about problems with collection objects sent out or received from other institutions for the purpose of research. Most of

the experiences came down to the fact that valuable collection material got lost, irretrievably damaged, or treated in the wrong way. The exchange of material between collections is essential for many kinds of research but it is also risky. Furthermore, loan policies differ widely from one institution to another. What is forbidden in one institution might be allowed in another. The implementation of 'our' common principles will harmonize them, will reduce the risk and will make the loan procedure more transparent for all partners. Apart from that, we are busy with setting up a European collection manager forum for the people with their hands on the collections, developing mechanisms in case a collection gets orphaned, discussing problems like collections security, the development of new collection facilities and political issues, e.g. repatriation and Access and Benefit Sharing related items."

What is next on your to-do-list?

"Next step will be the transition of the EDIT initiative into a self-sustaining working group under the new name Collection Policy Board and some new organisational structures like a chair. Linked with this the group will be opened up to institutions which have not been member of the EDIT project. The more like-minded colleagues sit around the table, the more stimulating the discussions will be. It will make the group even more productive and effective. Apart from structural changes we will continue and finish current tasks and projects as mentioned. In parallel new issues will be taken on board, e.g. common principles in collections acquisition and priorities in collections digitisation. I am not afraid of running out of topics."

How do you manage to do all this next to your own work at the NCB Naturalis?

"To be honest, I don't. That is why I am currently transferring some of my tasks and responsibilities to my colleagues within NCB Naturalis. This will allow me, as part of the ambition of the Leiden museum, to focus more on international initiatives. I think it is important to dedicate a certain amount of your working time especially to this task. Having in mind how busy I am and that this will not change in the future, it is an illusion to think that squeezing this work as an additional task in an overloaded agenda will work out. It simply won't."

Would you like to swop your job in Naturalis with one of your colleagues?

“Swop my job in Naturalis?! – I would like to, but not at the moment. The merger of the four institutions including their staff is both, the biggest challenge and most exiting opportunity, of professional life. I simply don't want to miss that. But after that, let's say in 2017, I would really like to work in a natural history museum abroad. However, I must admit I would prefer an institution somewhere far away, outside Europe. Sydney and Santiago, Chile, have drawn my attention on earlier trips and that has certainly to do with the beautiful countries in which they are situated....”

Last but not least: Where do you think this group will go? What is your vision of this group and collection management in general?

“I expect that the collection management as the whole, including policies and principles, will become more and more harmonized between institutions, in Europe but also worldwide. Working according to same rules and standards will become common practice. In doing so, our community of European natural history museums will then act in fact as a single and much more efficient and powerful network”.

“René, thank you very much indeed for this interesting interview. Good luck for your and the future of the Collection Policy Board!”