



E N H S I N

THE EUROPEAN NATURAL HISTORY SPECIMEN INFORMATION NETWORK



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

This volume has arisen from multi-national research co-operation aimed at improving access to a particular set of world-class research infrastructures (see Malacarne *in* Scoble, 2002: 5). The network engaged in this collaboration is the European Natural History Specimen Information Network (*ENHSIN*), which has been supported by the European Union under Framework Programme V.

Natural history specimens in Europe, as elsewhere, are found mostly in museums and in the herbariums associated with botanic gardens. These institutions contain, collectively, a wealth of specimens, and specimen equivalents (Chapter 10), in their collections. Scientists, and other users, need to know where these specimens are housed, and they also require access to the tremendous amount of information associated with them – for example, time and place of collection, history, and provenance. Much of this specimen information is now being recorded on computer databases. To provide availability to the data beyond just individual institutions, a common access system is required coupled with a search mechanism to an electronic network of specimen databases. Creating such a system requires solutions to technical demands. But besides technical challenges, there are other restrictions that may impede the flow of information across the Internet: these include policy issues, language, intellectual property rights (Chapter 6), and different institutional management models (Chapter 5).

ENHSIN has developed a demonstrator electronic network of seven specimen databases, with a user interface to a common access system (Chapter 3). It has been shown that specimen data for a given species (or other taxonomic category), which is spread across a distributed network of

databases, can be delivered to users across the Internet by a single search (see link to the interface at www.nhm.ac.uk/science/enhsin/). The partnership reviewed various approaches to interoperability (Chapter 7), and addressed the problems posed by the highly variable quality of specimen data (Chapter 8). Needs for access to specimen information were informed by means of a detailed questionnaire, and the results were used to compare and contrast differences between members of the scientific community and those from other sectors (Chapter 4).

ENHSIN is being expanded into another eu-funded project to create a pan-European operational system (a Biological Collections Access Service for Europe: *BioCASE*: www.biocase.org), and thus has been continued by a process of evolution. Of fundamental concern, however, is the wider issue of how networks and services of this kind can be sustained once the initial financial support ends. The vexed question of free access compared with different charging systems is examined in Chapter 5, along with other management issues. A significant innovation, which is being developed in *BioCASE*, is the creation of a thesaurus to facilitate access to specimen and observational records. Such a thesaurus is a massive and rich enabling device for users (Chapter 9).

4 Finally, *ENHSIN* does not exist in isolation, but is part of a complex of networking efforts, both European and global. The general context of the emerging information system for biological collections is explored in Chapters 1 and 2.

Reference

Scoble, M.J. 2002. *European Natural History Specimen Information Network: Research Infrastructures*. Project report: 2002, 32 pp. Brussels: European Commission.

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Malcolm J. Scoble

London, March 2003

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