

Museums, books and costs: public service vs private enterprise

by Andrew S. Richford

Museums house a variety of resources important for the research and preparation of manuscripts and artwork for new book and journal publications. In particular, they have collections of printed library materials and specimen collections of birds. In this paper, I focus mainly on prepared skins as a reference material for authors and artists, since these are by far the most heavily used non-library resources, although the importance of collections of eggs, nests, skeletons and tissue samples can be considerable for certain projects.

Authors preparing new books refer to skins for information on species identification, to resolve taxonomic issues, and to obtain data to confirm the geographic distribution of species and subspecies. In some cases their studies may establish new syntheses, while in others it is only necessary to check previously published results or resolve ambiguities in the published literature. Artists may also collaborate in such research, but mainly refer to skins to prepare new illustrations, usually combining measurements and information on plumage and form with data collected from photographs and detailed personal observations of living birds, whether wild or captive.

The growth of interest in birds and birdwatching has provided new information on birds and their biology, distribution and identification, and has also generated a growing market for new books on these subjects—field guides, reference handbooks, and books on avian biology and ecology. A synergistic relationship between avian scientists working in laboratory and field, museum workers, and professional and amateur birdwatchers has brought our knowledge of birds, and the books published on them, to a level of excellence scarcely conceived half a century ago when the first volume of Witherby's *Handbook of British birds* was published.

Many quality publishers have played their part in these advances, through careful and conscientious production and publication of books to the highest standards of the day. Each new book seeks to include the latest research and information, so regular reference to museum specimens and libraries is a continuing need. For example, while many different illustrations of, say, gulls or warblers have been published over the years, each new generation of illustrators has been able to incorporate new information on the plumage details of newly recognised taxonomic groups or on the fine distinctions between the different age and sex classes. This all advances our knowledge of species limits and field identification.

There will never be an end either to research on birds or to the need for new and better illustrated books. Museums and their collections have a key role to play in these advances, through the provision of resource material. In return, the work of many authors and artists often helps curators to understand their collections better and sometimes even to revise and refine the organisation and cataloguing of the skins in their care.

The natural history specimens assembled in the world's museums represent a heritage asset of outstanding importance. In a perfect world, this material would be held as a free public resource, contributing to and benefitting from the work of scientists and dedicated amateurs, as well as providing an educational resource for the wider public. The material held in museum collections also has an international context. It has commonly been gathered and donated by generations of fieldworkers, of many nationalities, operating all over the world, often with the explicit requirement that this material is for the use and edification of the public. Many specimens have been donated by the great philanthropists of the past. These collections are precious, important and in many cases simply irreplaceable—a historic and living treasure trove. In past centuries the main purpose of natural history museums was to catalogue the world's species; now they are also used to describe evolutionary change and the patterns of biodiversity, and to inform our efforts at conservation in a changing world.

But a trend is appearing that threatens the traditional constructive synergies. Increasingly, the funding necessary to maintain and curate museum collections is in short supply. In the U.K. in particular, budgets are dwindling and museums are being forced by their managers to find funds on their own account. A 'user pays' philosophy is starting to spread, leading to such things as entrance charges to the public and 'bench fees' for any users of skin collections, including bird artists, who are considered to be likely to benefit commercially as a consequence. Currently this tendency appears to be rare in Europe and only in its infancy in the U.S.A.; artists may be charged for actual expenses incurred in sorting or posting specimens, but not for time spent working in the collections. In many museums in the U.K., however, artists are now routinely charged for merely referring to skins at the museum bench. Museum curators and managers seem generally unhappy with the need to make such charges, but are left with little option in the face of reduced funding and management pressure from above.

Publishers, meanwhile, are always squeezed on the one hand by costs and on the other by market price resistance. A lavishly illustrated field guide often costs less than one of a pair of training shoes, yet is certainly far more expensive to produce. Publishing is a low-margin business. The list price charged for a book must cover fees and royalties to authors and artists, direct costs of copy-editing, origination, printing and binding, booksellers' and agents' discounts, and the publisher's overheads of staffing, marketing, warehousing and distribution as well as returning a working profit. This is a huge claim on the price of an average field guide or reference handbook. Bird books also often have large numbers of colour illustrations and are relatively expensive to produce: printing costs are high, despite constant improvements in the industry, and artists must of course be paid a living wage to produce the copious original artwork that illustrates new and better books. Yet many high-quality bird books are still quite specialist in nature, and print runs are relatively modest when compared to high-street bestsellers. Hence the cost of producing them must somehow be borne by a modest customer base.

Extra costs always increase the price of books. When bench fees are charged, artists usually cannot afford to absorb them within their usual prices, and must pass

the charge on to the publishers, who must in turn pass these costs on to readers through the book price. Hence the 'user pays' regime ultimately identifies the reader as the user. Perhaps this is as it should be in a capitalist society; but in my view the bench fee system engenders more evils than solutions. Although the fees that are charged are currently moderate, and seem to be charged only to artists, not to authors, they are a growing pressure on the costs of book preparation and hence book price. But being small, how much do they really address the financial difficulties of museums? How much of the charge is left after administration costs? It is easy to think that they are more to do with the philosophy of museum funding and access than the reality of solving the funding problem. But what if charging becomes more widespread, or charges increase so as to really generate worthwhile income, or authors are also charged for access to library and specimen resources? The impact on publishing and the price of books would be considerable. Books would really rise in price. Specialist books for smaller markets—arguably including some of the most valuable to the research community—would not be published at all if the price to be charged exceeds the publisher's expectation of what the market can realistically bear. Fewer, more expensive books will represent a loss to the scientific, museum and lay communities alike. Alternatively, artists and publishers will be forced to shun museums which make charges, to the detriment of the quality of the books they produce. Some of these things are already happening. Field guide prices in particular—books where the illustration costs are a major factor—are becoming really quite expensive and some U.K. publishers no longer use the Natural History Museum collections at Tring.

Ideology regarding the function of museums and the right of public access to their resources comes head to head with economic reality, and each will have their own attitude to the dilemma. I believe that museums should hold fast to the principle that they are the guardians of a common world heritage as well as the providers of the fruits of that heritage. Those who preside over the governance and funding of museums should understand that the provision of free access to their collections is a public and moral duty, that books produced with reference to museum collections add to the common good, and that such books feed back directly into the work of museum curators. By contrast, publishing runs to business rules and can only be expected to work in this way. Competition will manage the problem of sensible price maintenance if costs can be controlled. Publishers can help by continuing to do good business by providing good books. They can help museums justify free provision of resources by making fulsome acknowledgement of museum help, by showing museum logos on title pages, and by providing a generous allowance of complementary books for museum libraries. Museums would thereby gain kudos and standing by participating in publishing projects as partners in an educational and research activity—an extension of the service to the public which lies at the heart of their guiding philosophy.

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