Dancing Tables: Digitizing 11,000 Film-based Slides in Ten Days

Lisa Palmer ‡

‡ Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, United States of America

Abstract

How long does it take to digitize 11,000 film-based slides? Converting film to a raster graphic may take a relatively short period of time, but what is needed to prepare for the process, and then once images are digitized, what work is required to push data out for public access? And how much does the entire conversion process cost? A case study of a rapid-capture digitization project at the Smithsonian Institution will be reviewed.

In early 2016, the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) Division of Fishes acquired 10,559 film-based slides from world-renown ichthyologist John (Jack) Randall. The first-generation slides contain images of color patterns of hundreds of fish species with locality information for each specimen written on the cardboard slide mount. When Jack began his photography in the 1960's, his images were at the forefront of color photography for fishes. He also collected specimens in remote island archipelagos in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, thus many localities were, and continue to be, rare. The species represented on the slide are important to the scientific community, and the collection event data written on the slide mount makes the image and its metadata an invaluable package of information. Upon receipt of Jack's significant donation, the Division of Fishes received multiple requests from ichthyologists for digital access to the slides. The Division of Fishes immediately implemented a plan to digitally capture data.

With many rapid-capture projects at the Smithsonian, the objects and specimens are digitized, and then at some later point, any associated data is transcribed. The Division

approached this project differently in that the Randall collection was relatively small, and Smithsonian staff, primarily interns, were available to transcribe data before image conversion. Post-production work included hiring two contractors to import images and associated metadata into NMNH's collections management system. This presentation will review our processes before, during, and after data conversion. Workflows include transcribing handwritten data, staging and digitizing film, and importing data into the EMu client as well as using redundancies to ensure quality of data.

Keywords

digitization, transcription, transcribe, conversion, film, ichthyology, collections management system, workflows

Presenting author

Lisa Palmer