Conference Abstract

Access to Natural History Collections – from SYNTHESYS to DiSSCo

Sandra Knapp[‡], Sarah Vincent[‡], Christos Arvanitidis[§], Katherine Dixey[‡], Patricia Mergen[|,¶]

‡ Natural History Museum, London, United Kingdom
§ LifeWatch ERIC, Seville, Spain
| Meise Botanic Garden, Meise, Belgium
¶ Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium

Abstract

Any one collection of objects never tells the whole story. Enabling access to natural history collections by users external to a given institution, has a long history–even that great stay-at-home, Linnaeus, relied on specimens in the hands of others. Neglecting collections outside one's institution results in duplication and inefficiency, as can be seen in the history of synonymy. Physical access had always been the norm, but difficult for the single individual. A student in the late 20th century had to decide if money were better spent going to one collection or another, or if the sometimes rather fuzzy photographs really represented the taxon she was working with. Loans between institutions were a way to provide access, but came with their own risks. The very individualised–to users as well as institutions–system of access provisioning still operates today but has fundamentally changed in several respects. The SYNTHESYS (Synthesis of Systematic Resources) projects brought a set of European institutions into a consortium with one aim: to provide access to natural history collections in order to stimulate their use across communities. The SYNTHESYS Transnational Access (TA) programme provided access not only to the collections of participating institutions, but also to infrastructures such as laboratories and analytical facilities. The trajectory of TA has led to a change in thinking about natural history collections, along with access to them. Because access has been subsidised at both the individual and institutional levels, participating institutions began to function more as a

collective; one infrastructure, albeit loosely dispersed. In the most recent iteration of the SYNTHESYS programme, SYNTHESYS+, access has changed yet again with the times. Technological advances in imaging permit high-quality surrogates of natural history specimens to be exchanged more freely, and Virtual Access (VA) forms an integral part of the SYNTHESYS+ access programme, alongside TA. Virtual access has been operating for some time in the natural history collections community, but like TA, with individual scientists requesting images/sequences/scans from individual institutions or curators. VA, as a centralised service, will be piloted in SYNTHESYS+ in order to establish the basis for community change in access provisioning. But what next? Will we continue to need physical access to specimens and facilities as VA becomes increasingly feasible? As European collections-based institutions coalesce into the DiSSCo (Distributed System of Systematics Collections) infrastructure, will the model established in SYNTHESYS+ continue to function in the absence of centralised funding? In this talk, we will explore the trajectory of access through SYNTHESYS and provide some scenarios for how access to natural history collections–both physical and virtual–may change as we transition to the broader infrastructure that DiSSCo represents.

Keywords

access, collections, physical access, virtual access, DiSSCo, SYNTHESYS+

Presenting author

Sandra Knapp

Presented at

Biodiversity_Next 2019

Funding program

European Union H2020 (INFRAIA-2018-2020) Integrating and opening research infrastructures of European interest

Grant title

SYNTHESYS+ (H2020 grant agreement no. 823827)

Hosting institution

Natural History Museum and partners

Ethics and security

No ethical or security issues identified.

Author contributions

The authors equally contributed to this abstract and to the development of the subsequent presentation.

Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest to declare.