ICOM-CC-Ethnographic Working Group News

Pesticide Database Project Update

In the last newsletter, we extended the deadline for the return of the first round of pesticide database questionnaires, and later this summer, the questionnaire was also sent to the Textile, Leather and Natural History Working Groups. Even though these additional efforts did not lead to large numbers of responses, the results of the survey are nevertheless meaningful.

The questionnaire was returned by fifteen museums and two centralized state government conservation organizations that serve a number of museums. Ten of these institutions are located in Europe. We received four responses from North America, two from Australia and New Zealand, and one from Indonesia. The results of the survey are summarized below:

- As was to be expected, all responding institutions are interested in the subject of pesticide use in collections, and it is very important to them that information on the subject is collected and made available.

- The vast majority of institutions have at least some records of their use of pesticides. For most, this consists of written information such as old documentation, bills and orders, product information etc., and of oral information from current or former staff. One third of the responding institutions also hold researched and documented information on their history of pesticide use.

- Two thirds of the institutions indicated that they are currently researching and documenting their history of pesticide use, or that they are planning to do so in the next couple of years. Most research is carried out in regards to the history of pesticide use as well as on potential health hazards and adequate health and safety measures. One third of the respondents also collect information on the chemical and physical characteristics of pesticides, and on the mitigation and removal of pesticides. The information is mostly compiled in a collection of (computerized) documentation and paperwork, rather than in an institutional database.

- The majority of those institutions that have information on their history of pesticide use, on the chemical and physical characteristics of pesticides, and on the mitigation and removal of pesticides would be willing to make this information available to the public, either with reference to their institution or anonymously. About half of the institutions would make their information on health hazards and health and safety measures available to the public.

- Areas in which the responding institutions see the greatest need for more information are identification of pesticides, health hazards, health and safety measures and information on the mitigation and removal of pesticides.

- If the collected information was made available for public access, respondents would like it to be either a searchable database or an active searchable database to which information can be added, and preferably it would be accessible through a website. Some institutions expressed their wish that the website should also serve as a forum for discussions and professional exchange, and that information on current methods of eliminating pests on museum objects, including safer pesticides, should be included.

- Almost all of the institution from which we received responses would be interested in participating in a more detailed survey of the information that is currently available.
The responses to the questionnaire show that the identification of pesticides, health hazards, health and safety measures and the mitigation and removal of pesticides are the most pressing issues at this time. They also show that many institutions already research information concerning these issues. We are very pleased that a majority of those that responded would be willing to make the information available to the Working Group and the wider public, and that almost all of them would be interested in further participation in the project.

With these results in hand, the goals of this Pesticide Database Project were reviewed. The survey has confirmed that the development of a centralized database of pesticides used in the past in museum collections, with a centralized, web-based bibliography or references on identification, hazards and mitigation, would be very useful to the conservation field. However, the amount of work and expertise that would be required to create a forum where pesticide related information is collected, organized and made available to museum and conservation professionals, is beyond that of the Working Group coordinators or anyone who works in a full time position. The project would need funding in order to proceed, or institutional backing with commitment of staff time. Our Working Group has therefore decided to shift the focus of our efforts towards (1) building a bibliography and posting it on our Working Group's web-page of the ICOM-CC website; and (2) raising the awareness of potential conservation organizations, institutions and training programs who may have the means or staff time to take the larger, centralized database of information project on. We would welcome the input of the membership if they have further ideas on how to carry this work forward.

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