

First IABIN Council Meeting Project Summary: The IABIN European Inventory Project

Summary of activities July-November 1999

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The IABIN European Inventory Project is presently making an inventory of New World vertebrate collections in Europe. European museums, research institutes and private holdings hold a rich store of information on Neotropical biodiversity, especially from the pre-1900 period. However, this information cannot always easily be encountered. Especially for non-Europeans it may not be clear at all where specific information can be found.

The inventory will result in an Internet based Directory of New World holdings in European collections with the emphasis on vertebrates. The directory will contain general information on existing collections of relevance to the New World, but it will not contain detailed collection information. For detailed information an interested person has to contact the curator of an identified collection. The directory thus tries to put people in contact with each other. Potential users of the directory will be, among others, scientists and / or conservationists and policy makers.

Identification of possible relevant collections

A letter was sent out by electronic or surface mail to professionals all over Europe, containing two questions:

- First, we inquired whether the addressed person held a collection which possibly contained new world animals, that could be of relevance for inclusion in the Directory;
- secondly, we inquired for suggestions about other relevant collections in their country or anywhere else in Europe.

The addresses were obtained through the "Museums of the World" directory of Saur, and an Internet search on institutions and professional networks of taxonomists. At the yearly conference of the British Ornithologists' Union on "Why Museums Matter: Avian Archives in an Age of Extinction", personal contacts with a significant number of curators of bird collections were established.

As a result of the second question, the letter has created a cascade effect of people providing names of other relevant persons. At this moment (November 30, 1999) we have contacted over 320 professional taxonomists and curators of possible relevant collections all over Europe. Until now we have received nearly 120 reactions of which more than 70 have stated that they do have New World specimens in their collections. Reactions are still coming in.

Collections vary considerably in size and importance: we have a reaction from the curator of vertebrates at the British Natural History Museum in London, but also from a Priest in Valencia (Spain) who has some specimens that he collected during his mission in South America. Museums throughout Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe have reacted positively.

Although most reactions were extraordinarily friendly showing good will to participate, there was a common denominator in most answers. This is the obvious lack of funding and manpower in European museums, suggesting that the provision of detailed and thus elaborate information in the questionnaire is impossible. This strengthened our idea that the questionnaire should be as user-friendly as possible, not taking more than two hours to fill in.

(Development of the) Questionnaire and internet site.

If curators think their collections can be of relevance for inclusion in the Directory, we informed about their willingness to fill in a concise questionnaire. As most of the collections are not yet computerised, often only assessments of numbers of specimen and geographical origin of the collection can be made. We have structured the questionnaire in such a way that both very broad and very detailed information can be provided.

A *taxonomic list* has been developed that will allow the respondent to provide data at the appropriate level of taxonomic detail: i.e. class, order or family level. The official Zoological Record hierarchy has been used as the basis, but it has been twisted a little to have it fit in three levels and to limit the lists appearing in draw open boxes in the Internet-based questionnaire. Tests with some collection listings showed that the list is functional; we explicitly do not pretend to give "the" taxonomic hierarchy.

Furthermore, a *geographical list* has been elaborated that gives the respondent the possibility to provide information on regional, as well as on the more detailed country level.

The questionnaire will be made available in three ways, thus providing the curators three options to fill it in:

- a. On paper, to be filled in by handwriting.
- b. On diskette, in Microsoft Word.
- c. On a website on Internet at the address <http://www.cheperu.nl/iabin-eu> (preferred option).

The questionnaire and the relational database underlying the website consists of three levels:

- the institution, with general information on the institution
- the collection, in the case of a larger institution with separate, named collections and the address of the responsible curator
- taxon information with indication of geographical range of the collection (to be filled in at the appropriate level, i.e. generalised or more specialised).

The respondent that decides to fill in the form on the Internet will be presented a screen that contains as much pre-defined information as possible. Draw-open boxes and tick-marks will reduce to amount of typing to the minimum.

Developing recommendations for opening up information to New World investigators

One of the sub-objectives of the European Inventory is the identification of institutions that possess or are in the process of creating a computerised collection database. During the project a number of these institutions will be visited to learn more about these systems. For example, recently a visit has been paid to the BIOCISE project in Berlin where a metadatabase is developed containing information on existing databases in the field of biological information in Europe. This information is collected for possible future links that may be established with similar initiatives in the New World (most notably at present the *Species Analyst* under NABIN).

Planned actions

The website will soon be launched on the above-mentioned address. The questionnaire can then be sent to all persons who reacted positively, with a password for each institution to get access to the questionnaire and linked database. Each institution gets a unique password, thus avoiding that strangers or people from other institutions can change the contents of the database. It is estimated that most reactions will have been incorporated in the database by February. The Directory and related website for the end-users can then be finalised. The end-user web-site will provide three search entrances to the directory: a taxonomic search, a geographical search (origin of collections) and a search on institute.

Personal visits to institutions will probably be aimed at further acquisition of information on database / Internet initiatives and/or obtaining information from important undisclosed collections.