

# The Natural History Museum: Inspiring public engagement with science

Michael Dixon, Director

At the Natural History Museum we believe the future of the planet depends on a comprehensive understanding of the natural world. We share knowledge, engage people's curiosity and encourage their enjoyment of the planet with a sense of responsibility for its future. Any organisation delivering such lofty ideals is bound to be complex and the mix of skills, facilities and endeavour enshrined by the Museum is rarely visible. The NHM is a world class collection of natural history specimens and artworks, a centre of scientific excellence, a learning resource, a place of public engagement with science, and an iconic building as well as one of the UK's leading visitor destinations. Our work also contributes to the delivery of strategic priorities of several government departments.

The Museum is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) and receives grant-in-aid from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, supplemented by a range of income generating activities that are necessary to fund the activities we undertake. The biggest contributors are scientific grants from the Research Councils and other grant awarding bodies, retail and catering businesses for our 3.3 million visitors, a conference and events business utilising the buildings and gardens and consultancy services based on our scientific and exhibition design expertise, and many other activities also make profitable contributions.

Our Science Group is responsible for the curation of collections of over 70 million biological and geological specimens. Items are loaned for both research and exhibition purposes, with as many as 70,000 being offsite at any one time. Scientific staff publish over

500 peer reviewed articles annually and many are world leaders in their field. We also house about 70 PhD students, for whom there is co-supervision with scientists in UK universities, and MSc students on courses that we run jointly with Imperial College. Our scientists also provide access to information on the world's biological and geological diversity, principally through our library which probably holds the world's greatest natural history collection, and by providing identification for specimens collected worldwide. We handle around 45,000 enquiries annually from professionals and the public.

Our Public Engagement Group operates at South Kensington and Tring<sup>1</sup> and through outreach, touring exhibitions in the UK and overseas and our website, which attracts almost a million visits monthly. Annual visits have doubled from around 1.65m to 3.3m since the reintroduction of free admission in December 2001 and we have programmes to attract a more diverse audience. Over 95% of our visitors consider their experience good or excellent. We have established a design consultancy from our touring exhibition business that has worked on high profile, overseas projects and co-designed the UK pavilion at the Expo in Aichi, Japan this year. We also support primary and secondary school curricula and engage in organised educational activities with around 400,000 children annually.

Over 40 years ago the British Museum Act formally created the Natural History Museum as a scientific organisation with the public side run by the Public Services Agency. Nowadays our role in providing education, information and entertainment for our visitors



has taken on greater prominence, which is dependent on the extent and quality of our scientific work and the collections that we hold. We recognise that this must be relevant to the issues that concern the general public and provide evidence to inform public debate. Our Darwin Centre provides state-of-the-art conditions for storage of our collections and world-class facilities for our scientists and is used in bringing scientists and the public closer together. Visitors can see our scientists at work on our collections that are used to address new questions about the natural world and engage with them in interactive sessions that are web-cast on a daily basis.

Our public services are closely aligned to government policy. This includes our sponsoring department, DCMS, the DTI/OST 10 year framework for investment in UK science, the UK's obligations under the convention on biodiversity (CBD) overseen by DEFRA, the commitments to the next generation inherent in DfES policy and overseas capacity building via the British Council/FCO, with whose support. DCMS and the NHM are training the next generation of curators in post apartheid South Africa.

It is an exciting time to have taken over as Director. Our economic value to the taxpayer is proven. For every £1 invested, we generate £4 for the UK economy<sup>2</sup>. The future of the Museum is also about inspiring the scientists of the future. We have been onsite in South Kensington for almost 125 years but our role has never been more relevant or necessary.

<sup>1</sup>The NHM also operates the Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum at Tring

<sup>2</sup>Travers, T, Glaister, S and Wakefield, J (2003) *Treasurehouse and Powerhouse: An assessment of the cultural and economic value of the Natural History Museum*