

Annual meeting of the Consortium of Northeastern Herbaria, 13 June 2012, New Haven, Connecticut

The annual meeting this year was held in conjunction with the 27th annual meeting of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections and was held at the Omni Hotel in New Haven.

Patrick Sweeney presided, reporting on the consortium's activity during the past year. Membership in the consortium now includes 58 herbaria, about 42% of all the herbaria in the region and up very slightly from a year ago. A brief discussion ensued about the usefulness of continuing the effort to recruit additional members. Several consortium members reported that they have had little success in trying to reach small herbaria, repeatedly leaving messages, which are not returned. It was generally agreed that it would make sense to suspend recruitment efforts at this point.

The region's data portal now makes available more than 400,000 specimen records from 14 institutions, and Sweeney recommended that more energy be placed on increasing participation in the data-sharing initiative. Only about a dozen of the region's herbaria were invited to provide data for the initial demonstration of the consortium's web-based data portal, and Sweeney suggested that it would be worthwhile now to invite additional herbaria to participate, providing their data so they can be served on the CNH portal.

Participation in the data-sharing project requires that individual herbaria sign a data-sharing agreement, and questions raised about how that agreement was drafted led to a discussion about consortium governance. Dorothy Allard said consortium minutes from past years provide no information about the origins of the data-sharing agreement. Janet Sullivan said she and Karen Searcy drafted the agreement after reviewing those that other regional consortia are using, and Sweeney said the agreement had been approved by the consortium's steering committee. Allard questioned whether the steering committee should have the authority to approve such agreements or whether they could be reviewed and discussed among consortium members. Sweeney suggested that, when the steering committee creates a committee to work on particular issues, it could ask other consortium members if they want to participate and that, after the committee completes its work, its conclusions could be posted online for comment by the membership before the steering committee takes any action. Sweeney agreed to work with Dorothy Allard and Michael Donoghue to draft a policy on consortium governance decision making procedures.

A discussion also was held on the data-sharing policy itself, with Allard questioning the wording in one provision that states: "The sharing of data in a lower quality than the original (e.g., 'fuzzed' locality information) is not recommended. If this is done, it must be disclosed using the 'dataGeneralizations' field to say so." Sweeney explained that the intent of this provision is not to discourage herbaria from suppressing information on the exact location of rare

species but to discourage herbaria from deliberately providing inaccurate location data. After further discussion, it was agreed that the wording of the provision should be revised to eliminate any ambiguity.

In other business, Sweeney reported that Yale and six other institutions had been awarded an NSF grant through the Advancing Digitization of Biodiversity Collections program. The grant will make it possible to database and image New England specimens in a total of 15 herbaria, including those at the Brown University, Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Vermont, and several smaller herbaria: Bartlett Arboretum, Berkshire Museum, Boston University, Central Connecticut State University, Connecticut College, Keene State College, Harvard Forest, Western Connecticut State University, and Westfield State College. The project will capture data on a total of 1.3 million specimens in order to permit analysis of the regional effects of changes in environmental conditions.

Peter Desmet announced the launch of “Canadensys explorer,” a tool permitting the searching, downloading and mapping of data in nine collections, including seven Canadian herbaria – a total of more than 500,000 specimens. Desmet demonstrated the tool’s ability to search for individual specimens and to filter search results by collection, collection date or location. Although the searchable data include specimens of insects and fungi, nearly 400,000 of the specimens in the collections are plants.

James Macklin said he is involved in two projects that are looking for volunteers. One is the AppleCore, which is effort to develop best practices for the way in which Darwin Core data are entered in various database fields. The second is an effort to develop a way to automate the searching of botanical literature. Specifically, Macklin said volunteers are needed to assign words in the botanical treatments to categories.

In other discussion of governance, two steering committee members announced that they must resign. Karen Searcy of the University of Massachusetts, said she will be retiring in the coming year, and Peter Desmet of the Université of Montréal Biodiversity Centre, said he will be moving to Europe. Dorothy Allard from the University of Vermont, Paul Harwood from Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and Deborah Metsger from the Royal Ontario Museum volunteered to serve as new members of the steering committee.

CNH portal: <http://neherbaria.org/CNH/>

Canadensys explorer: <http://data.canadensys.net/explorer>

AppleCore: <http://code.google.com/p/applecore/>