

## **Minutes of annual meeting Consortium of Northeastern Herbaria 4 June 2010, Ottawa**

The annual meeting of the Consortium of Northeastern Herbaria was held in Ottawa on June 4, 2010, in conjunction with the annual meetings of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections and the Canadian Botanical Association. This was the Consortium's most well-attended meeting to date, thanks largely to the good representation from Canadian institutions.

In opening the meeting, member Jennifer Doubt of the Canadian National Herbarium and the Canadian Museum of Nature welcomed consortium members to Ottawa, and steering committee chair Patrick Sweeney briefly described the Consortium's history and mission. He reported that membership now is up to 51 herbaria (from 36 a year ago), and some discussion followed on ways to recruit even more of the 138 herbaria in the region. A demonstration database that the Consortium has been building for several years now has 16 institutions' data in it and a total of 1900 specimen records.

Sweeney demonstrated a web portal for a regional database into which herbaria in the Northeast could begin to deposit their data as a way of increasing access to data and adding to the services provided by the Consortium. No solution has been found yet for the problem of getting specimen records from the region's more than 50 small (fewer than 10,000 specimens) herbaria digitized, although there was general agreement about the importance of finding a solution, particularly since many of the small collections have specimens from otherwise poorly collected areas and specimens that are not duplicated in larger herbaria.

Jennifer Doubt gave a presentation on the Canadian Museum of Nature, where she is chief Collections Manager. She spoke about the important historical specimens in the 1.2 million-specimen collection, including particularly significant collections from the arctic. About 20% of the collection is databased, and the museum is using three scanners to create images of plant specimens. The museum has an active outreach program that includes participation in a Bioblitz, lectures and workshops for the public as well as a what's-your-favorite-tree contest.

James Macklin and Rich Rabeler spoke about the U.S. Virtual Herbarium project. Macklin said there has been talk about an online national herbarium since 2004 but that it was thought to be more efficient to concentrate efforts on developing regional distribution networks instead of a single national portal. Rabeler said that, during a workshop led by Mary Barkworth earlier this year, several goals were established, including digitization of all herbarium specimens in the United States within 10 years. Macklin said a web site will be established soon for the US Virtual Herbarium, hosted by the National Biological Information Infrastructure, and that federal funding to support digitization projects is expected next year.

Peter Desmet provided an update on the progress of Canadensys, a network of collections in Canada. He said Canadensys will soon move into a new building in Montreal and that the Vascan database will launch in September. Canadensys will provide databasing tools to Canadian herbaria; these tools include lists of taxonomic synonyms and vernacular names, and a distribution plotter. Desmet said he also has been designated as the official Canadian "helpdesk expert" for the Global Biodiversity Information

Facility and is organizing workshops to help Canadian collections with georeferencing and with the GBIF Integrated Publishing Toolkit.

Brent Mishler of the University of California, Berkeley, spoke about the Consortium of California Herbaria and offered advice to the Northeast consortium about making data available online. Mishler recommended that the consortium not worry about the IPT and sending information to GBIF but, instead, make the data quickly available through a regional portal. Simply consolidate the information, write a script to format it as needed and put it online, he said. Having demonstrated the ability to do this, the consortium would be in a position to apply for NSF funding to get additional herbaria digitized and online, he said. The California consortium now has more than 1.1 million specimens available online (more than 557,000 of them are georeferenced) and it has done this without creating a steering committee or establishing bylaws, he said. The California consortium's initial idea was to make available only California specimens (herbaria in California hold a total of 6.3 million specimens), but the consortium now wants to add California specimens that are held in herbaria outside the state. Mishler said that California, like the Northeast region, has struggled some with how to enlist small herbaria that have no staff; he said each of these herbaria will have to be "adopted" by a larger herbarium that then becomes responsible for managing the small herbarium's digital data.

Sweeney led a discussion of consortium business, including the question of why some herbaria in the region have not yet become consortium members. Janet Sullivan of the University of New Hampshire said her impression is that some small herbaria may feel they are not sufficiently active to be considered legitimate herbaria; others fear that, if they become members, something will be expected of them. A number of people had suggestions on how to make it easy for herbaria to enter their data for distribution through the regional portal, including the idea that an Excel file should be posted with the appropriate headings into which data could be entered. Luc Brouillet of the University of Montreal pointed out that smaller herbaria may be happy to contribute specimen data to the regional portal because, by doing so, they provide a service to the larger botanical community and demonstrate that their specimens are of value, helping to justify the continued existence of the herbaria. Providing an Excel file or Specify worksheet with the necessary headings would make it easy for herbaria to recruit students who could enter the necessary data. It was agreed that emails will be sent to members and non-members of the consortium when the web portal becomes active and data-entry forms are available, encouraging all to enter data so that they can be made available online.

Discussion was held about the location of next year's annual meeting, and Luc suggested it be held in Pennsylvania, since the consortium has never met that area. A number of people agreed that Philadelphia would be a good location, affording opportunities for field trips to many botanically rich sites, including the Pine Barrens in New Jersey and Longwood Gardens. James Macklin suggested that a worthwhile workshop to hold during the meeting would be a demonstration of how some small herbarium's specimen data can be cleaned up and put online quickly. A second workshop on georeferencing – a demonstration, not just a discussion – also would be worthwhile, he said.

In other business, Melinda Peters will become a member of the steering committee, replacing Elizabeth Zacharias, whose position at Harvard is ending. Jennifer

Doubt will continue to serve on the committee and will work with Luc Brouillet in trying to get more Canadian herbaria to become consortium members.

Patrick reported that Yale and Harvard are discussing the possibility of submitting a grant application this year to the NSF Improvements to Biological Research Collections program, which would provide money to explore ways in which small herbaria can be digitized. No small herbarium has yet been selected for the project, he said.

Submitted by Bob Capers on June 17, 2010. Minor edits provided by Patrick Sweeney on August 11, 2010.