

# Workshop

## Broadening the user base of natural history collections

An EDIT and SYNTHESYS initiative

November 4-5, 2008

Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels



Natural history collections<sup>1</sup> are libraries of natural objects such as plants, animals and fossils. These objects are collected and preserved because they form a rich source for scientists to study the natural world. By storing the physical object and not only an image or description of the natural organism, natural history collections aim to maximise the possibilities for new scientific discoveries.

Within biodiversity research, taxonomists and evolutionary biologists are the traditional users of natural history collections. But their work is only one part of these collections' value. For environmental research, agriculture, genomics, climate studies, epidemiology, and other societal and management related areas, collections have become indispensable. Crucially, collections have in the past and will continue in the future to answer questions that are unrelated to the reasons for their establishment. Today, natural history collections are already used in many of the domains mentioned, but they can play a much more important role.

Within this context EDIT and SYNTHESYS, two networks of natural history institutions and botanical gardens, announce a meeting that will bring together users, managers and funders of natural history collections. The format of the meeting will be a combination of short presentations, focused workgroups and open discussions. The following subjects and questions will be on the agenda:

**Current usage of collections.** Collection users from different areas will talk about their work while focus on:

- What they want and do with collection data
- Which potential and what barriers they encounter when using collections

**Managing collections.** Collection managers will discuss:

- Background of collection organisation and access
- The rationale behind usage protocols, loan and destructive sampling policies

**The future of natural history collections** by focussing on:

- Future trends in collection use
- How collections managers and natural history institutions can prepare themselves for future demands

Below follows a short introduction of the two organising networks.



EDIT (European Distributed Institute of Taxonomy) is an international consortium of natural history organisations, which seeks to reduce fragmentation of European taxonomic research and to coordinate the European contribution to the global taxonomic effort. This Network of Excellence started in 2006 within the context of the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Commission.



SYNTHESYS (Synthesis of Systematic resources), is a European Union-funded Integrated Infrastructure Initiative grant. This five year project which began in February 2004, comprising 20 European natural history museums and botanic gardens, aims to create an integrated European infrastructure for researchers in the natural sciences.



EDIT and SYNTHESYS are both funded by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. The central objectives of the programme are: strengthening the scientific and technological bases of industry and encourage its international competitiveness while promoting research activities in support of other EU policies.

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<sup>1</sup> The description of natural history collections is based on the website of the Natural history Museum, London: <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/> and on the article by Kevin Winker (2004). Natural History Museums in a Postbiodiversity Era. *Bioscience* 54, 5, pp. 455-459.