

Guest Editorial: University of the West Indies Zoology Museum

This issue of *Living World* has presented me with a timely opportunity to let it be known that The University of the West Indies Zoology Museum (UWIZM) is open and ready for business. UWIZM is a place where members of the public can bring zoological specimens for help with identification and researchers can come and study any of the approximately 30,000 specimens. Tours are available for groups from pre-school to secondary school and for the general public as well.

UWIZM has its origins in the collections made for the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in the 1920s. Insect pests make up the bulk of the early specimens but as teaching needs changed and as new staff members came and went, the collections grew to include other animal phyla. The most significant collections are the beetles, moths and butterflies, social insects, freshwater fish, freshwater crustaceans, reptiles, stony corals and molluscs. Over the decades the specimens were looked after by a variety of lecturers and technicians but it wasn't until last year, when I started, that the museum had its first full-time curator.

There are two rooms that make up the museum: the Land Arthropod Room with all the insects, arachnids and myriapods and the Zoology Room with the wet and dried specimens from all the other animal groups including vertebrates, molluscs, corals and crustaceans. As space is at a premium, they are more like stores that happen to be available for visits rather than fully fledged museum displays. However, there are plans for a dedicated multidisciplinary museum on the UWI St. Augustine campus, combining all of the university's collections in one place.

The main task right now is to catalogue all the specimens and make the information available in an online database. As well as the UWIZM, there are collections held by other organisations in Trinidad and Tobago and on the other UWI campuses and it is my hope that they can be added to the database as well. This would provide a single place for accessing information on natural history specimens for the country and the region.

Looking through the back issues of *Living World* there are many occasions when museums are mentioned as places to go and examine old specimens relevant to a current study or somewhere to lodge new specimens once a study is completed. When I looked at the museums the vast majority are either from the U.S.A. or the U.K., which is not surprising as these two countries are home to the biggest biological collections in the world.

There have been a few mentions of UWIZM over the years but not nearly as many as I first hoped. The majority comes from one of the journal's most prolific authors, Matthew Cock, whose many papers on the skipper butterflies of Trinidad often mentioned specimens from the Sir Norman Lamont collection. Other mentions include John Michalski, who left a collection of dragonflies and damselflies from his 1987-88 article, and Peter Bacon who, as far back as 1975, was leaving his specimens in the museum. Not surprising as he was a student and eventually head of the department of Life Sciences where the museum is based.

These voucher specimens are a crucial part of the scientific method which is based on the principle that the results of a study should be repeatable and verifiable. It can be a problem if there is no specimen to examine and on occasion it has been found that the species that has been studied is not the same as the one named in the paper. Voucher specimens are the only reliable way of confirming the identity of a species in a study and as such their preservation and accessibility is of much importance. They need to be stored in a research museum that is committed to their long-term care and preservation and the data that goes with them needs to be made available to future researchers.

Unfortunately there are many occasions when specimens are not lodged with a museum quite often because they were never collected in the first place. It is not just the responsibility of the researchers to deposit their specimens but also the journals in which their studies are published need to encourage them to do so. This means that the specimens will be adequately looked after and the papers in the journals are more likely to stand up to investigation and will thus prove more valuable in the long-term.

I hope that in the future any researchers working in Trinidad and Tobago will consider it a necessary part of their study to deposit voucher specimens with all the relevant data at UWIZM. Specimens will be accessioned, catalogued, photographed and the data made available online.

For further details about UWIZM please go to <http://sta.uwi.edu/fsa/lifesciences/zoology.asp>

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