

Minutes of Meeting to Discuss the Potential for Collaborations Between the Centre for World and Environmental History and Kew Gardens.

16th January 2015

University of Sussex.

Present;
Vinita Damadaran,
Rob Iliffe,
Chris Mills

After a brief conversation about the recent restructuring at Kew. Vinita Damodaran outlined two proposed projects involving Indian institutions with whom the CWEH has developed connections through the *Network for Collaborative Research on the Botanical and Meteorological History of the Indian Ocean, 1600 to 1900*.

In collaboration with Dr Paramjit Singh (director of the BSI) and Dr Venugopal (director of the Indian Museum) funding was to be sought – in the first instance from the AHRC – in order to produce and transport a major exhibition based on Joseph Hooker's India collections. An exhibition on Nathaniel Wallich had also been suggested. Chris Mills stated that he would be happy to collaborate on such a project and would have no difficulty in constructing an exhibit based on Kew's Hooker collections. It was however noted that the 2017 bicentennial of Hooker's birth may complicate the use of certain key materials. Further it was noted that the availability of suitable facilities would determine the acceptability of sending Kew collections to India, however, any difficulties in this regard might be overcome by the use of facsimiles rather than originals. On the subject of cost, figures of £50-100k were mentioned, with the use of facsimiles being significantly cheaper than originals. An understanding of available facilities was therefore a precondition of any more accurate costing. The £100k 'follow on' funding available as part of the *Network . . .*'s original funding package was suggested as a possible source.

The second project to be discussed was the construction of a new flora of India. This project, being actively pursued by Paramjit Singh of the BSI, would involve the production a database of Indian plant types held in British herbaria. A flora of modern India would be constructed, which, as well as being of great value to modern science would allow for interesting comparison with the only other complete flora of India produced, that of Hooker (1870s). The impossibility of completing such a project without the help of Kew and access to their historical collections was noted. Chris Mills observed that while Kew's collection of 'type specimens' had been digitised many other collections had not. Vinita Damodaran remarked that up to 10% of Hooker's specimens may have remained in India. The restrictions of the current functionality of the Kew digital catalogue were also mentioned. Currently, it was observed, specimens could only be found by searching directly for individual species. Different functionalities which allowed for searching by collection type, source etc. which represented more of the history of the objects and collections would be one of the goals of this project.

Rob Iliffe described how such work might fit into a much bigger project conceived of as the final and most ambitious goal of the *Network . . .* This project would look at constructing a very large database integrating all types of sources on the Indian Ocean environment. At this stage an appropriate goal might be the production of an integrated database including samples, specimens and correspondence relevant to the British botanical presence in India over the period of a century

or more. Such a database would address key historical questions such as; how did Britain's scientific knowledge of India develop? how did British Imperial expansion rest on the discipline of botany? How did this colonial role effect the development of botany as a science? While at the same time producing usable datasets for scientist interested in botany, biodiversity, and climate change.

Chris Mills noted that Kew's collection of director's Asian correspondence had been digitised up until the directorship of David Prain (1905-1922). Rob Iliffe argued that while digitisation itself was not valueless, usability of data was severely compromised by its scattering throughout disparate repositories or 'silos', and that access of various data types, from different sources, via a single gateway or architecture, which enabled searching across collections was essential to ensuring impact at the academic level.

On the subject of funding the AHRC were seen as the obvious choice. It was noted that the Wellcome Trust had recently funded the British Library's digitisation of a collection of medical topographies, the medical nature of botany and the fact that many of the early collectors were EIC ship's surgeons is seen as perhaps opening up this avenue. EU funding was also discussed. A project to construct a modern flora of the Himalayas by a Chinese group was mentioned as representing a potential collaborator and source of funds.

Chris Mills mentioned a collaborative project with the NHM on the Wallich records and also Kew's digitisation of the 'East India Herbarium', but observed serious problems with interoperability. In this connection, the proposed 'granularity' of digitisation – ranging from basic imaging up to full transcription facilitating searchability at the level of individual words – was discussed. Full transcription was seen as incredibly labour intensive and as representing poor value for all but the most significant collections. Furthermore it was noted that ensuring survival and access to collections and associated data at the basic level needed to be the primary goal, operability and presentation could remain very basic. It was observed that the connection with Indian institutions raised the possibility of digitising large amounts of data at low cost, however, the outsourcing of digitisation of a Wallich collection to a private company by the BSI must be investigated for issues of ownership. All data must remain open access in order to ensure availability, and in turn, impact.

Chris Mills stated that Kew would expect some exchange of data if it were to open its archives to Indian institutions. A previous project looking at materials collected by, and relating to the career of William Roxburgh, which, after eight years had failed to produce satisfactory exchange was described by way of caution.

Referring to recent experiences at a conference in Gottingen, and in relation to the pursuit of EU funding, Rob Iliffe noted that UK based projects were at an advantage when it came to demonstrating impact. Years of focus on value-for-money in an intensely competitive funding environment had engendered a tighter focus on access and quantity of data at the expense of elaborate presentation.

In summary it was decided that Rob Iliffe would draft two to three paragraphs on a proposed collaboration between Kew, Sussex, the BSI, the BL and the National Archives of India. At the very least this project would look to bring together collections of correspondence and materials relating to the careers of Hooker, Kyd, Roxburgh, Wallich and the collections of Kew and Calcutta botanic gardens.

Link

Wellcome Trust funding web page.

<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/index.htm?gclid=CJPu3ZmIpcMCFaMewwodu34A2w>