The background features a collage of green triangles of various sizes and shades, scattered across the page. A small, dark blue lizard is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, facing right. The text is centered in the upper half of the page.

ICOM Code of  
**Ethics**  
for Natural  
History  
Museums



# ICOM CODE OF ETHICS FOR NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

Ethics Working Group of the International Council of Museums International Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History, ICOM NATHIST

Note: The term “natural history museum” covers all institutions that collect, display and research materials collected or extracted from ‘the natural world’.



The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums* was adopted unanimously by the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of ICOM in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) on 16 August 2013.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums* supplements, and is complementary to, the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. It was developed between December 2006 and November 2012 to address specific issues relevant to the life and earth sciences. The objective of this document is to establish a minimum standard of practice, which can be built on by individual institutions.

The document begins with a Position Statement that describes the purpose of natural history museums and states that all information should be accurate and with a responsible consideration of the academic disciplines concerned. Additionally, members of ICOM NATHIST should take the Committee's published position statements into account when developing policy.

Section 1 covers Human Remains. Although the *ICOM Code of Ethics* covers care and display of human remains, natural history institutions that include this in their collections can face complex and specific challenges. This section covers standards of compliance with legislation, the origin and descendants of the people represented by the material, dignity of presentation and repatriation.

The second section covers standards relating to specimens of other extant and recent organisms, including invertebrates and plants. The section includes collecting, displaying and storing this material, as well as its associated data. Emphasis is placed on ensuring provenance, sharing data and dignity of display. Museums that display live specimens are covered by augmenting the standards set by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Section 3 considers Rocks, Minerals and Fossils. Fossil material is considered to be the traces or remains of plants, animals and other organisms preserved for geological timescales by virtue of their deposition conditions. It is argued that they should be treated appropriately within legislation. This includes minimising environmental impacts of collection.

Collecting and restitution is addressed in the fourth section. It covers ethical consideration around deposition and repatriation of natural history specimens, as well as data sharing and 'value add' activities such as object conservation and stabilisation. Section 5 gives standards for Duty of Care for People and Objects, which includes occupational safety and health, exchange of objects and best practice guidelines for storage and handling.

Section 6, Publication, is the final in the document. It sets out the need for natural history data collected to be published, fully disseminating the work to the scientific community. Appendix gives standards for Taxidermy.



## INTRODUCTION

The *ICOM Code of Professional Ethics* was adopted unanimously by the 15th General Assembly of ICOM in Buenos Aires (Argentina) on 4 November 1986. It was amended by the 20th General Assembly in Barcelona (Spain) on 6 July 2001, retitled *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, and revised by the 21st General Assembly in Seoul (Republic of Korea) on 8 October 2004.

The present draft of the *Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums* was developed between December 2006 and October 2011 to complement the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. It specifically addresses issues relevant to the life and earth sciences in greater depth than is possible in the general ICOM Code which provides base-standards encompassing different types of museums and specialised collections. The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* should therefore be viewed as a parent document to the *Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums* and any perceived conflict should default to the former.

It is also recognised that while some institutions already have a code to which they adhere, the standard is not universal. Thus, the objective of this document is to establish a minimum standard of practice which can be built on by individual institutions.

## POSITION STATEMENT

The multifaceted purpose of natural history museums is to:

- Build and store natural history collections
- Conduct research and interpret the results
- Support the process of science and biological conservation
- Enhance public understanding and appreciation of the natural world
- Collaborate with the public in deriving their own meaning from the natural heritage they encounter in the museum and in nature

While differences among cultural milieu and personal opinion are respected, all dissemination of information, whether through display, publication or other means should be well-founded, accurate and with a responsible consideration of the academic disciplines concerned. Members of ICOM NATHIST should take its published position statements into account when developing applicable policies.

## NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

Natural history collections in museums are a three-dimensional archive of the natural world and relationships of societies with their environments. In many cases, they may document a world that no longer exists. As such, these collections should be treated with the care and attention merited by such an important resource.



## SECTION 1. HUMAN REMAINS

Although the *ICOM Code of Ethics* covers care and display of human remains (ICOM Code 2.5; 3.7; 4.3) natural history institutions, which frequently include human remains and sensitive ethnographical material in their collections, can face complex challenges. Thus, an opportunity exists to explore the ethical issues in greater depth than provided by the ICOM Code. Institutions displaying or storing human remains must always observe the following standards:

- A. Any legislation, both local and international, governing the use and display of human remains
- B. The origin of the material and the wishes of any descendants or other stakeholder groups must be considered in all circumstances.
- C. Human remains should be stored and displayed with dignity, in appropriate environmental conditions.
- D. Human remains should only be displayed or used scientifically in circumstances where the highest professional standards can be implemented. Where extant representatives of the cultural groups exist, any display, representation, research and/or deaccession must be done in full consultation with the groups involved.
- E. Artefacts made from or including human remains should be afforded the same dignity as human remains. In cultures where hand-made artefacts have the same cultural and/or spiritual significance as human remains, this material should be treated similarly, with full consultation.
- F. Human remains, and parts thereof, are also to be found within archaeological and ethnographical / anthropological collections and ICOM NATHIST members should also take into account the restrictions and standards that apply within these disciplines.
- G. Repatriation is appropriate where objects still confer a spiritual and/or cultural significance, or where they can be irrefutably demonstrated as being stolen. All material being considered for repatriation, even unprovenanced material, must be properly documented with respect to the repatriation process. Any repatriation that does take place must be undertaken with the full knowledge and agreement of all interested parties and comply with the legislative and institutional requirements of all parties involved.



## SECTION 2 SPECIMENS OF OTHER EXTANT AND RECENT ORGANISMS, INCLUDING INVERTEBRATES AND PLANTS

Institutions collecting, displaying or storing the remains of any organisms should endeavour to store and display this material to the highest possible standards to ensure its preservation and that of its ancillary data. It should be recognised that ancillary data, for example details of the collection locality and the date of collection, add considerably to the value of any material.

In order to reach these standards the following criteria should be followed:

- A. Institutions should ensure that all such material is obtained legally. Material should never be purchased, imported, collected or removed in contravention of national and international legislation or conventions pertaining to such material. It is recognised that it is sometimes difficult to establish legal acquisition. If material is acquired and subsequently discovered to have been collected illegally, the relevant authorities should be informed and further steps be taken as required by the country or countries involved. If more than one institution is involved, refer to the ICOM Code 6.2, which states that, if possible, dialogue should be established between museums in preference to government or political action.
- B. Natural history material held in storage should be freely available, concomitant with the aims of conservation/preservation of those materials, for legitimate research without incurring a commercial charge, save on a cost-recovery basis. Information relating to the material should also be made available, taking into account confidentiality agreements, its inclusion in on-going research projects, and species protection. Associated costs may be legitimately recovered by a holding or owning institution, but collection access should not be run as a commercial activity.
1. For plants, the following recommendation from the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature 2006 (Recommendation 7A) should be followed: It is strongly recommended that the material on which the name of a taxon is based, especially the holotype, be deposited in a public herbarium or other public collection with a policy of giving bona fide researchers access to deposited material, and that it be scrupulously conserved.
  2. For animals, the following recommendation from the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature 1999 (Recommendation 72F) should be followed: *Institutional responsibility. Every institution in which name-bearing types are deposited should:*
    - i. 72F.1 ensure that all are clearly marked so that they will be unmistakably recognized as name-bearing types;
    - ii. 72F.2 take all necessary steps for their safe preservation;
    - iii. 72F.3 make them accessible for study;
    - iv. 72F.4 publish lists of name-bearing types in its possession or custody; and
    - v. 72F.5 so far as possible, communicate information concerning name-bearing types when requested.

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- C. Photographic restrictions should normally only apply if the specific material concerned is new, unpublished, or on-going research may be jeopardised, or if the material is politically sensitive or covered by intellectual property legislation. However, museums retain the right to charge market rates to commercial entities wishing to use images for profit-making activities.
- D. Animal remains should be displayed with respect and dignity regardless of the species or its origins. It is understood that 'respect' may be interpreted differently depending on the country, institution as well as the lands, cultures or peoples from which the animal material originated. Institutions should develop guidelines appropriate to their own milieu and audience and apply these consistently.
- E. While a distinction is made between natural history museums and zoos, it is recognised that some museums keep animals in long-term captive display. Institutions collecting, researching or displaying living organisms should only do so if they can reach the minimum acceptable standards required for the health and welfare of the organism concerned regardless of the perceived status of the species/organism itself. The following conditions should be met: <sup>1</sup>
1. The display of live animals at the museum must fully meet all legal requirements for the display of live animals.
  2. Museums keeping live vertebrates should have an ethics committee set up to approve the project, as well as monitor the animals' living conditions and care records.
  3. All staff responsible for the care and maintenance of the display animals should be appropriately trained in care and handling procedures.
  4. Contractors that undertake programs or other activities at the museum involving live animals hold the appropriate approvals under appropriate local legislation.
  5. Live animals are only used when they can be looked after appropriately, and when they can form part of a positive message about nature for our visitors.
  6. impacts on the animals are monitored and, if any adverse impacts are detected, a museum should immediately review the display and determine whether the exhibit/activity should continue.
  7. Long-term live collections should adhere to the Code of Ethics formulated by the World Association of Zoos (WAZA) 2003, irrespective of whether or not they are WAZA members.
- F. Commercial sale of animal remains or animal-derived products to the public should only come from renewable sources that do not threaten species or environments. All sales should comply with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) <sup>2</sup>, and any local or regional legislation or regulations which are in force.
- G. No specimen should be collected that would threaten the sustainability of the species. Rare breeds of domesticated stock and farm or zoo breeding programmes of rare and endangered animals and birds may be acquired for display if they have to be put down for legitimate reasons such as ill health or trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from Display and Use of Live Animals in Public programs at the Australian Museum, 2004

<sup>2</sup> All States are encouraged to ratify the CITES Convention (1975), if they have not already done so. However as best practice, institutions in non-signatory States should adhere to the terms of the agreement.

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- H. When collecting from nature only the minimum number of specimens necessary should be taken, with as little disturbance to habitats as possible. Any animal killed under the aegis of a museum should not involve animal pain or distress. Individual museums should maintain up-to-date manuals on the accepted methods by which each group of animals in its collection will be humanely killed.
- I. Environmental sustainability and animal welfare should be considered in determining the sample size of collections. In determining whether an animal will be killed by a museum, the following considerations should be made:<sup>3</sup>
1. *Collection should occur only after a decision has been made that it is justified, weighing the predicted scientific or educational value against the potential effects on the welfare of the species.*
  2. *Replacement: Techniques that totally or partially replace killing animals for the collection should be sought and used wherever possible.*
  3. *Reduction: Each project must use no more than the minimum number of animals necessary to ensure scientific and statistical validity.*
  4. *Refinement: Animals must be suitable for the scientific purpose taking into account their biological characteristics including phylogenetics and distribution.*

## SECTION 3. ROCKS, MINERALS AND FOSSILS

We consider fossil material to be the traces or remains of plants, animals and other organisms preserved for geological timescales by virtue of their deposition conditions. As such, they should be subject to applicable legislation and collection standards.

Institutions collecting, displaying or storing rocks, minerals or fossils should always endeavour to store and display this material to an acceptable standard that ensures its preservation.

- A. Institutions that collect or purchase minerals, rocks or fossils for display or research purposes should ensure that the material is collected in a manner that does minimum damage to the deposits from which they are extracted. If such acquisitions are the result of large-scale commercial activities, every reasonable effort should be made to ensure that these activities do not end in the destruction of a site or deposit.

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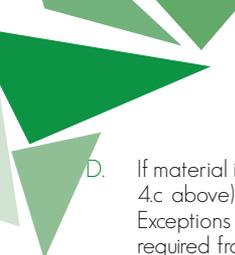
<sup>3</sup> Modified from the Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes, 2004

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- B. Geological material sold to the public under the aegis of museums should be acquired only from recognized sources or suppliers who can ensure that only limited and controlled extraction takes place under recognised conservation guidelines. Information about conservation of geologically important sites should be made available to the public at the point of sale and, where possible, certification of the specimens' legitimate collection.
  - C. Sale or trade of fossil material to collectors and the general public, from areas of high scientific value (e.g. locations from which the fossil fauna is not fully understood or documented) is discouraged. The commercial sales of material from known sites should also be monitored to ensure that these non-renewable sources are not over exploited for purely commercial purposes to the detriment of science as a whole.
  - D. Institutions that collect or purchase minerals, rocks or fossils for display or research purposes should ensure this is done following the legislation of the source country and of their own country. Guidance in Section 2 of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums should be followed whether or not such legislation exists.

## SECTION 4. COLLECTING AND RESTITUTION

A number of individual countries and communities have restrictions on collecting for research. Restrictions are necessary to protect vulnerable species, deposits, habitats and communities and are usually based on sound science. In some cases, however, legislation may restrict scientific requirements for environmental protection, even to the point of limiting valid scientific endeavour. Nevertheless, whether scientifically defensible or not, best practice research must always remain within the bounds of existing legislation.

- A. If permits are required for the collection or export of material these should be sourced and any associated ground rules established prior to a research trip being undertaken. Collectors should follow policy and legislation for collecting both in the locality in which the collection is made and in the locality in which the museum is based. i.e. if the state in which the museum is based has more stringent animal ethics requirements than the state in which the collection is made, then the requirements of the home state should be followed.
- B. Institutions and individual members should ensure, wherever possible, that information gathered in the field is made available at the earliest opportunity to the relevant authorities or institution within the country in which the material is collected.
- C. The deposition of all material collected should be determined before fieldwork commences. This is important if one or more parties outside the country of origin will be 'adding value' to specimens (e.g. preparing collected fossils to a paleontological standard). If required to do so, all material collected should be shared between a local institute in the country in which the material is collected, and the initiating individual or research institute which is undertaking the work.

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- D. If material is already held outside its country of origin, whereupon 'value' is added (Ref Section 4.c above), it shall be deemed, except in rare cases, the property of the holding institution. Exceptions include cases in which the material was collected without a permit when one was required from the originating country, or in which the material has a significant connection to indigenous peoples. Scientific or monetary value alone is not sufficient to support restitution.
  - E. All natural heritage materials held within our institutions, and the related information about them, should be considered to be in global custodianship rather than the sole property of the institution in which such material resides.<sup>4</sup>
  - F. Neglect of part or all of a collection is never acceptable. In situations where capacity to care for or store collection material properly becomes limited, every effort should be made to put the material into a position of low activity or secure maintenance. Deaccession, even for transfer to another institution, should be viewed only as a last resort.
  - G. ICOM NATHIST actively encourages the free flow of knowledge and a minimum of restrictions while safeguarding the specimens and natural populations encompassed by collections within museums and associated institutions. Commercial interests should not prevent access to scientific datasets or bona fide research into a species, or species group, especially when their conservation is at stake.

## SECTION 5. DUTY OF CARE FOR PEOPLE AND OBJECTS

ICOM NATHIST encourages institutions, regardless of size and location, to develop and adhere to policies for the occupational health and safety of staff, and to internationally agreed base-standards of care of objects.

- A. Institutions have an obligation to ensure that their activities do not impinge on the health and safety of staff, visitors and others. This includes use and disposal of hazardous chemicals and the storage and handling of objects.
- B. Exchanging or selling either biological or geological specimens that have been donated to the museum for the public good to agencies outside the museum sector is strongly discouraged and must not be done when the material is of importance to indigenous peoples and/or other cultural groups. In general, the selling of collection items should be institution-to-institution, rather than on the open market.
- C. Objects should be stored and cared for according to best practice guidelines. The following publications (listed below) set out minimum standards for holding collections in the United Kingdom. ICOM NATHIST suggests that these guidelines be adhered to as minimum standards for best practice internationally.

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<sup>4</sup> Global custodianship carries with it a presumption that disposal of material for any reason should be undertaken under the guidance of an acknowledged peer group.

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1. Standards 1 in the *Museum Care of Archaeological Collections* 1992. Museums and Galleries Commission, UK
  2. Standards 2 in the *Museum Care of Biological Collections* 1992. Museums and Galleries Commission, UK
  3. Standards 3 in the *Museum Care of Geological Collections* 1993. Museums and Galleries Commission, UK <sup>5</sup>
- D. Display of natural history objects should be undertaken in a manner that is mindful of materials conservation standards. Objects should be displayed in appropriate environmental conditions, away from harmful chemicals or other substances that may cause them damage over time. While on display, objects should be adequately supported and protected from human interference, e.g. unwanted handling or theft.
- E. Collection managers are encouraged to keep abreast of agents of deterioration that might affect particular materials in their care and seek specialist advice where necessary.

## SECTION 6. PUBLICATION

- A. It is frequently the case that data collected never reach the scientific literature. Researchers are strongly encouraged to publish, or alternatively make their records available through other sources, so that other workers may benefit from their findings.
- B. Publication of data should be in peer-reviewed journals that are readily accessible by the scientific community.

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<sup>5</sup> ICOM NATHIST adheres to the standards set out in the following publications

- CODE OF ETHICS - ICOM code of ethics for museums 2006
- Horie, C.V., 1989, *Conservation of Natural History Specimens - Spirit Collections*. BCG Publication
- Hower, R.O., 1979, *Freeze-Drying Biological Specimens: A Laboratory Manual* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington
- Nudds, J.R., & Pettitt, C.W., 1997, *The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections*. Geological Society, London
- Roberts, D.A., 1985, *Planning the documentation of museum collections*. The Museum Documentation Association.
- Roberts, D.A. ed., 1987, *Collections Management for Museums*. The Museum Documentation Association.
- Rose, C.L., Hawks, C.A., & Genoways, H.H., 1995, *Storage of Natural History Collections: A Preventive Conservation Approach* Vol. 1 SPNHAC.
- Rose, C.L. & Torres, A.R.de., Ed., 1995, *Storage of Natural History Collections: Ideas and Practical Solutions* Vol. II, SPNHC.



## APPENDIX

# THE ART OF TAXIDERMISTRY AND ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE IMPORTANCE: CODE OF BEST PRACTICE FOR THE CARE OF TAXIDERMISTRY

1. Avoid removing specimens in their original cased displays or settings. If uncased, ensure no mechanical or other physical damage can take place due to storage conditions.
2. Make accessible all associated information, including the name of the Taxidermist and the date of preparation, if known.
3. Produce and file condition reports and undertake regular inspections (at least annually) to ensure no damage or infestation has taken place.
4. Undertake any restoration to specimens or displays in sympathy with the Taxidermist's original intentions and techniques.
5. Keep a full record with photographic evidence of any conservation work, including any work undertaken on the surrounding case or display.
6. Preserve all scientifically important material and all extinct and endangered material in institutional collections, no matter how poor the material may appear to be.
7. Agree and use a formal collecting policy when deciding whether or not to dispose of a specimen.
8. Dispose of material to alternative institutions. If no local institution is willing or able to accept this material, then seek alternatives before contemplating any sale or destruction. In the case of foreign material contact institutions in the country of origin and offer them such material. (CITES REGULATIONS PERMITTING). Remember this could be an important part of their cultural heritage.
9. Dispose of material by destruction only when all other possible alternatives have been exhausted.
10. Keep a full photographic record of all material conserved, removed or disposed of, and retain copies of any documentation in the original institution.

ICOM NATHIST  
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The International Council of Museums (ICOM), created in 1946, is the world organisation representing museums and museum professionals, committed to the promotion and protection of natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. With approximately 30,000 members in 137 countries, ICOM is a unique network of museum professionals acting in a wide range of museum- and heritage-related disciplines.

### Leading international actions

Maintaining formal relations with UNESCO and a consultative status within the United Nations Economic and Social Council, ICOM also partners with entities such as the World Intellectual Property Organization, INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization, in order to carry out its international public service missions, which include fighting illicit traffic in cultural goods and promoting risk management and emergency preparedness to protect world cultural heritage in the event of natural or man-made disasters.

### A centre for reflection

ICOM's commitment to culture and knowledge promotion is reinforced by its 31 International Committees dedicated to a wide range of museum specialities, who conduct advanced research in their respective fields for the benefit of the museum community. ICOM has the ability to mobilise experts in cultural heritage worldwide in response to the challenges museums face around the globe.



International Council of Museums (ICOM)  
Maison de l'UNESCO  
1, rue Miollis 75732 Paris cedex 15 - France  
Telephone: +33 (0) 1 47 34 05 00  
Fax: +33 (0) 1 43 06 78 62  
Email: [secretariat@icom.museum](mailto:secretariat@icom.museum)  
Website: <http://icom.museum>