

## **BEST PRACTICES – what does that imply?**

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One of the topics that generated substantial interest during the survey and discussions on research priorities for natural history collections conservation was the concept of “best practices”. There is an awareness among professionals that certain techniques and protocols are more appropriate or effective than others, but the question surfaces, “what are they?” The professional community wants to improve the quality of care and management of natural history collections and is requesting “best practices.”

However, what constitutes a “best practice?” Suppose a symposium is held on the topic, “Care of Plant Collections” or “Preparation Techniques for Vertebrate Study Skins,” and a volume is published based on symposium presentations. Even if standard review procedures are followed for each manuscript, would it be acceptable to title the volumes, “Best Practices in the Care of Plant Collections” or “Best Practices for the Preparation of Study Skins?”

Before refining the implication of the term, best practice, consider the terms, standard and guidelines. According to recent publications these terms are defined as follows:

**guideline** - formalization presented by a technical society or governmental agency as basis for voluntary adherence as the basis for acceptance of work product; requires additional thought and evaluation by the practitioner to implement on single project work. (Hatheway 1992)

**standard** - a measure, principle, model, etc., established for use as a rule or basis in comparison in measuring or judging capacity, quantity, content, extent, value, quantity, etc. (Anonymous 1982)

- a codification of technology or procedure developed, tested, peer-reviewed, and published by a professional society or governmental agency; to be adhered to by members and subscribers; generally must be followed closely in attention to its prescribed detail. (Hatheway 1992)

Guidelines state the basis for an acceptable product or process. The individual faced with implementing the guidelines must evaluate and interpret the intent of the guideline in light of the institutional setting and immediate circumstances. This guideline suggests a certain level of quality or process, but generally this is a minimal level rather than one of exceptional quality. Guidelines are also voluntary; although recommended they are not an absolute requirement.

A standard, by comparison, is more rigidly defined, with less room for interpretation or extrapolation into a situation. The standard exists only following a process of testing and peer review, and in some fields this process can be very formal and extensive. To claim a certain level of quality or achievement for a particular practice, one is required to follow the standard.

Where does the term, best practice, fit in comparison to standards and guidelines? An informal query on the discussion list, NHCOLL-L, led to a series of interesting comments, including:

"Best practice" implies to me that some sort of professional judgment has been made - the field has been surveyed and the professionals all agree that this is "best practice". The closest term in my mind is "standard" - it is the goal to which we all aspire.

(NHColl-L:798; Nov 30, 2000; C. Rissanen)

Both of these, and "best practices", imply judgment by someone. The last seems to imply in addition, that some review of ideas has occurred and a consensus has been reached ("this is what we agree is best"). "Standards" implies there's some minimum level of achievement below which you've failed, hence has negativity. "Guidelines" seems more neutral, seeming like something anyone can follow and achieve. "Best practice" is the most positive, implying a goal toward which everyone can work.

(NHColl-L:799; Dec 01, 2000; R. Panza)

... "best practice" clearly implies a group review. I can foresee a group of professionals "deciding" that a group of procedures is better than others and thereby stamped it as "best." I think it does carry a feeling of an endorsement from at least part of the community.

... Guidelines sound like just that, something to follow at least for a minimum performance standard. If you want to exceed a standard, follow the "best practice." I am involved in local municipal planning and this seems close to the analogy of just meeting the stipulations of a building or zoning code requirement or exceeding it. A later comment I saw included comments about "standards". Again, I think the analogy fits. A "standard" can be seen as what you should do to meet at least a minimum professional grade. If you exceed it, all the better. "Best practice" to me implies exceeding the minimum.

(NHColl-L:797; Dec 04, 2000; R. Rabeler)

... "best practice" has been more highly evaluated than "protocol", which may have been more highly evaluated than "guidelines".  
For example, as a new curator training new student technicians for mounting vascular plants, I gave them guidelines based on my limited experience and the "traditions" that had been in place here. Now that I have 16 years of experience, better knowledge of products and techniques (thanks, in large part, to SPNHC!!!), I feel I could write a protocol for mounting specimens. The input of the community of conservators, who have shared their product/method testing, to the community of curators'/collections managers' development of improved techniques can lead to development of "best practice".

(NHColl-L:797; Dec 01, 2000; D.Lewis)

Based on these comments, one expects best practices to be at least at the level of quality and achievement as standards, and that a system of review and evaluation by appropriate professionals has taken place.

Will there be a guideline, standard and best practice for every aspect of caring and managing natural history collections? Highly unlikely! It makes sense for there to be “guidelines for managing bird collections” as an overview, but unlikely that there would be “standards for managing bird collections.” There are too many aspects of an institutional setting that can not be standardized. Standards, however, will be developed for materials to be used in storing nests, eggs and study skins or for documentation of loan transactions. There might be a “best practices for managing bird collections” that would incorporate known standards for materials with recommended guidelines for procedures. This would imply that the entire volume has been evaluated by members of the professional community and reflects the highest level of practice at that time.

### **BEST PRACTICES – where do they come from?**

Development of and writing about best practices comes from the practitioners and researchers in the professional community. Taking some of the top research priorities identified in the recent survey, one might apply to the Institute of Museum and Library Services Conservation Project or the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training for funding to complete research and write a manuscript.

Evaluation and review of best practices is also done by the professional community. Many of the best practices that might be developed for the field of natural history collections care and management must be reviewed from the perspectives of the researchers, collection managers and conservators, if in fact the practices are to be fully evaluated and have credibility by the different participants in our community. One possible avenue would be for the Documentation Committee of SPNHC to manage the review process, calling for reviewers from the Conservation Committee and membership to represent the three perspectives. This review process needs to be a standard system that supports an objective, thorough evaluation; it needs to focus on the content and methodology of the practice described. It needs to be a credible process so that anyone using a ‘best practices’ publication can be assured that there was a serious level of evaluation before the final product was released. I would recommend the evaluation process remain distinct from the review system of the Publications Committee, though, so as to avoid bogging down the publication process and cycles.

Finally, best practices must be published, and SPNHC does have a standard system for reviewing and publishing both articles and special publications.

Although “best practices” may be a trendy term, certainly a great marketing one that promises only the good and wonderful, it does provide a challenge to the community to create, evaluate and publish those practices that reflect the state of the art for natural history collections care and management.

### Literature cited

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