Old fauna from old samples: the database and collections of the Liège Zoological Museum

Michèle Loneux

Zoological Museum of the University, Quai Ed. Van Beneden 22,
B-4020 Liège, Belgium

E-mail: Michele.Loneux@ulg.ac.be

The zoological collections of the University of Liège contain many marine animals. The oldest ones come from South America and South Asia, collected in mid 19th century. Others were collected at the end of the 19th century by Edouard Van Beneden, who organised several trawls from Oostende. After this, the work on marine fauna and plankton continued at Liège with D. Damas, M. Dubuisson and others. Several marine expeditions or short trips to marine stations all over the world served to collect material for research or courses' illustration.

With the successive splitting up of one lonely professor's charges into several smaller departments, the museum has progressively lost its role of conservation centre of the studied material, particularly after the second war. Since its official opening to the public in 1962, with the new created Aquarium, its collections have been forgotten by the researchers, even the specimens are always conserved and systematically classified in depositories, as well as in the exhibition rooms. In 1992, we started to automate collections management, and created a database using Filemaker software on Apple computer (FMP 4.0 on Imac).

We began to transcribe the basic information from the sheets of hand-written first inventory register opened in 1837: inventory number, year of record, Latin name (genus, species), geographic origin (country, region), number of specimens, conservation mode, cost (when bought). Four years of work were required to complete the file with this strict kind of information. Progressively we are adding systematic information on taxonomic ranks (Family, Order, Class, Phylum, …) using world reference books on taxonomy; creating separated register numbers and cards for the individuals of a group of specimens or species previously registered on the same number; adding information on stock location, state of conservation, papers published on the material, reproductions available, status of the species, etc.

The taxonomic work takes a lot of time because we must update the synonymy. Today, the main base contents 21728 cards. The sorting power of Filemaker software allows search and sort of all kinds. Fields may be combined for presentation documents, and styles can be applied on the information. We chose to present here the content of our marine collections. The aim is to inform about the nature and origin of marine animals in collection so as to attract interested researchers for a valorisation of the material.

To meet all kinds of research requests on animal biodiversity, we created other databases for the microscopic slides collection, and for the entomological collections. Moreover, the FMP version 4.0 had been chosen for its applications on the web: indeed, we planned to allow access to the data through the Museum website.

Unfortunately, time available for this application is limited, and progress is slower than what we would wish: offering web access to the data has not been implemented. Potential partners for this venture are welcome to contact us.