

Fall 2021 Internship Summary
To: Internship Stipend Committee
From: Jewel Trail
Date: January 11, 2022

In my application letter I spoke about uplifting voices not historically acknowledged in museums, because the voices of those I cared about were not often heard growing up. At first glance, this internship with the vertebrate zoology collections at the National Museum of Natural History has nothing to do with uplifting voices. How can you uplift the voice of something that has no voice? That does not breathe air? Through this internship, however, by striving to follow all best practices for recordkeeping, I have been able to identify ethical stewardship as a highly motivating factor for me in my work. Finding this language for my career ambitions has emboldened me to seek out opportunities of reconciliation, such as with culturally sensitive materials or through organizational volunteer working groups to actively discuss the challenges of ethical stewardship in recordkeeping.

My daily workflow was as follows: (1) Access digital copies of historic catalogue ledgers according to a standardized filing and naming system; (2) Transcribe only the missing consecutive catalogue records from the handwritten entries using judgement making skills rooted in best practices; (3) Verify that the information remains scientifically correct using trusted ichthyology resources; (4) Enter the transcribed metadata into a curated spreadsheet which will later be imported into EMu; (5) Again using judgement making skills rooted in best practices, pull internal record numbers (IRNs) from EMu pertaining to different types of metadata, such as taxon, collection event, or transaction; (6) If appropriate records are not already in EMu, create the records. Additional tasks could include using standardized language to create catalogue notes and proofing other interns' work. The daily workflow is straightforward yet routinely confounded by misinformation in the ledgers, illegible handwriting, and improper record keeping both historic and modern.

Of my daily tasks, the experience to most influence my professional practices and opinions is the balance of qualitative versus quantitative entries into the collections management system. Or, as it manifested in this internship, how and in what field to report data corrections, inferences, and verbatim remarks. Sometimes this was as simple as updating taxonomy metadata to the currently accepted values, while at other times it could mean reporting and correcting location designations with derogatory terms. Correcting the historical record, to use popular language, at its very foundation of the museum catalogue records embodies the museum's responsibility to its publics to steward its collection well.

While I have taken courses in museum ethics as well as the history, legal expectations, and theories of collections management, it was not until I was completing this internship that I understood why my degree is called *museum studies*. Even though my primary task was to transcribe verbatim the handwritten entries, it was impossible to completely remove bias and not apply any interpretation to locations, the meanings of vague notes, or other crucial metadata fields. The conversations around best practices for this kind of work are deep and ongoing, as I learned from the listservs, professional workshops, and forums that I am now engaging in with

my own reflections from this internship. They could not be happening at a better time, too, as many museums shifted to data entry and database cleanup during the pandemic. I look forward to continuing to contribute to the meaningful work and conversations museum professionals are having about ethical recordkeeping.